

FREE INSIDE: 10 TRACKS, 10 NEW BANDS

BLENDER

Axl
BACK!
Slash
NEVER
LEFT!

**The
Killers**
SHOTS
TILL
DAWN!

23
REASONS
WHY
2009
WILL NOT
SUCK
No Doubt
U2
Eminem
Pearl Jam
& **Super
Hot
Twins**

Fall Out Boy

THEIR SECRET
BREAKUP AND THE
ALBUM THAT KEPT
THE BROMANCE ALIVE

Franz Ferdinand
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FEBRUARY 2009

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YOUR NAME BECOMES A
SYNONYM FOR DOUCHEBAG."

—FALL OUT BOY'S PETE WENTZ

PHOTOGRAPH BY KAI REGAN

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The bassist is conflicted about his fame. The guitarist wishes he had some. The singer wanted to quit the band and go solo. And the drummer is just waiting for the apocalypse. But somehow the emo foursome has managed to keep its shit together.

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Sixteen-year-old Blake Peebles has pulled off one of the greatest feats in all of teenage history: convincing his parents to let him drop out of high school to play *Guitar Hero* for a living.

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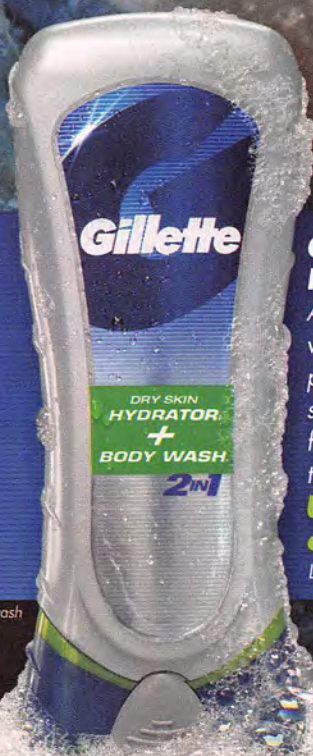
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KAI REGAN. Styling by
Karen Levitt for Ford Artists.
Grooming by Jenna
Giorgioli. Prop styling by
Eleventh Street Workshop.
Clothing credits on page 43.

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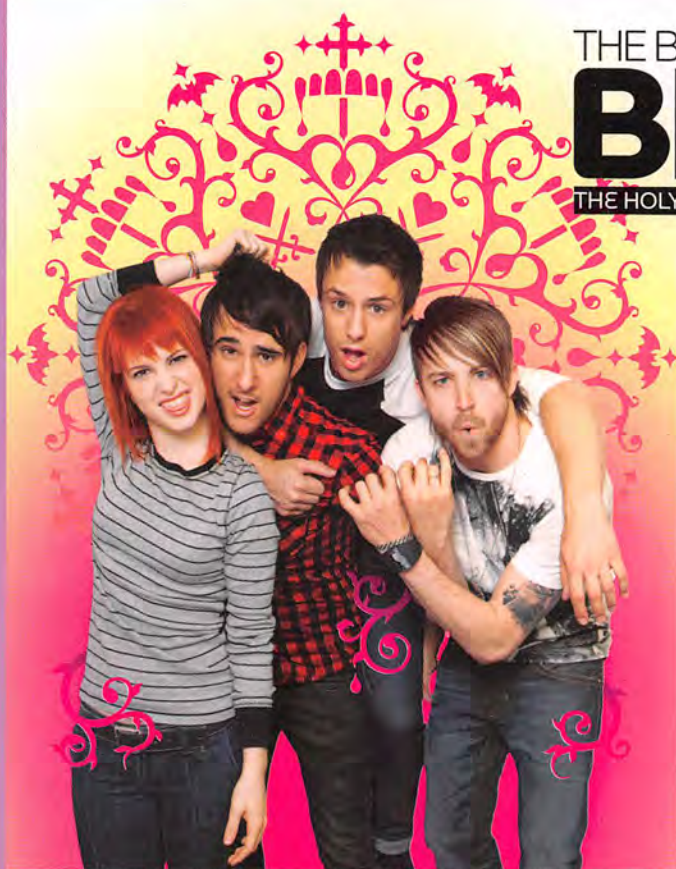
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THE BLENDER BIBLE

THE HOLY COMMANDMENTS OF POP CULTURE

1 Paramore "Decode"

CHOP SHOP/ATLANTIC
From the *Twilight* soundtrack, a roaring, Evanescence-esque kiss-off to some loser dude. Will all loser dudes please stop messing with Hayley Williams?

2 M.I.A. feat. Jay-Z

■ **"Boyz (Remix)"**
"Boyz" (Remix)
Mr. Hov makes a playdate with Ms. Arulpragasam, turns her boy-toy jam into a dope-boy anthem.

3 Beyoncé

■ **"Diva"**
Columbia
Meanwhile, Mrs. Hov rides a stuttering "A Milli"-like beat and makes the case for equal-opportunity hustling.

4 The-Dream feat.

■ **Lil Jon**
"Let Me See the Booty"
Def Jam
The beat is breathtakingly spare. The asses serenaded are the overstuffed gravity-defying opposite of spare. The combo is unstoppable!

5 The Loom

■ **"Song for the Winter Sun"**
[online]
A hand-clappy lullaby about sleeping through the coldest months.

6 Nickelback

■ **"Something in Your Mouth"**
Roadrunner
A gleefully boorish single entendre from Kroeger and Co.

7 Andrew Bird

■ **"Oh No"**
Fat Possum
From the best whistler in indie rock, a soaring, string-laden lament about being trapped in a mine shaft.

8 Elektrik Red

■ **"We Fuck You"**
Radio Killa/Def Jam
Hot 'n' heavy L.A. R&B foursome makes it abundantly clear who does the fucking in their relationships. (Hint: not you.)

9 Lily Allen

■ **"Everyone's at It"**
Capitol
A tut-tutting track about Prozac Nation—and Coke Nation and Crack Nation ...

10 M. Ward

■ **"Never Had Nobody Like You"**
Merge
The raspy-voiced troubadour is all luvy-duvy (and grammatically incorrect).

11 Blaqstarr feat.

■ **M.I.A.**
"Way Down in the Hole"
Mad Decent
The Tom Waits–penned *Wire* theme undergoes most radical interpretation yet.

12 The All-American Rejects

■ **"I Wanna"**
Doghouse/DGC/Interscope
Sleek, new-wave-tinged brat punk says to hell with it and gives in to horniness.

13 Rich Boy

■ **"Drop"**
Zone 4/Interscope
The Alabama brag-gart gets his mush mouth on over a rumbling, moaning Polow da Don production.

14 Ghostface Killah

■ **"Computer Love"**
Def Jam
GFK compares himself to Elmer Fudd, mints a new alias (Martin Luther Bling) and generally spazzes out over vintage Zapp. *Whoa.*

15 Fake Male Voice

■ **"OMG!!!!FMV!!!!"**
Heartfast
TV on the Radio's Tunde Adebimpe makes like the indie-rock Prince with this weird-ass, noisy-ass booty-call jam.

16 The Killers

■ **"Spaceman"**
Island
Greetings, Earthling! We are from a planet called Vegas! Your kind visits often, wearing "fanny packs" and losing Earth dollars on "the nickel slots." We come in peace!

17 Franz Ferdinand

■ **"Ulysses"**
Domino USA/Epic
The Scot fops return with some druggy, Homer-inspired lyrics and sawing synthesizers in tow; the beat is as thumpingly four-on-the-floor as ever.

18 Kanye West

■ **"Robocop"**
Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam
Did Trent Reznor ghostwrite the music? Behold a clanking, whirring industrial ballad about one tough (cyborg) mama.

19 Jay-Z

■ **"History"**
Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam
Factoids about the Boer War, Monroe Doctrine, Protestant Reformation and—psych! Jigga just gets slick over a sweet John Lennon interpolation.

20 Framing Hanley

■ **"Lollipop"**
Silent Majority
Is this screamie, modern-rock Lil Wayne cover good? Not exactly. But if the whole best-rapper-alive thing ever dries up, Weezy's got a career in horny nü-metal songcraft.

GO HERE

RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

Headed to the Marvelous City for Carnival? Or perhaps just for butt implants? Here's the Carioca skinny ...



caipirinha-swilling hordes out front—this subterranean club plays rock, house and techno, and is “for people who don’t want to go to the parties in the ghettos,” Diplo says.

4 WHERE THE WAITERS ARE OLD AND THE FISH IS FRESH ...

SHIRLEY
Rua Gustavo Sampaio 610, Leme

A classy restaurant situated in an alley just off the tourist radar. “It’s been open for over 50 years—same menu, same waiters,” raves Bêco Dranoff, who runs Brazilian pop label Ziriguiboom. “It’s a trip!”

5 BEST LATE-NIGHT JUICE FIX

B.B. LANCHES
Rua Aristides Espínola 64, Leblón

Juice bars are a Rio fixture, and this one is open until 4 A.M. “I go here after concerts,” Kassin says. He recommends fruta do conde, which looks like an artichoke and tastes banana-peary. **JON COPLON**

specializes in baile funk and traditional samba—he spins here Fridays, says M.I.A. producer and baile expert Diplo, but you’ve got to travel to a rough-and-tumble hood to see him. Hey, resorts are for squares!

1 BEST CRATE DIGGING

L.O. MATTA
Rua Siqueira Campos 143, Copacabana
Hidden in an old shopping mall, this store is a world-beat-rarities

treasure trove, according to Alexandre Kassin of tropical rockers Kassin +2: “I got this great Pedro Santos African psychedelic album from ‘68!”

2 WHERE TO SHAKE YOUR THONG (TURISTAS, BE WARNED ...)

PUBLIC BASKETBALL COURT
Cantagalo favela
DJ Sany Pitbull is a local god who

3 WHERE TO SHAKE YOUR THONG (TURISTAS WELCOME)

FOSFOBOX
Rua Siqueira Campos 143, Copacabana
You’ll know the place by the

WEAR THIS

Penfield

This Massachusetts-based outerwear house was founded in the ‘70s and recently got a hippped-up, skater-friendly relaunch. There are plaid shirts and canvas shoulder bags, but we most love the Summit Color Block parka (right), which looks like something John Cusack’s skiing rival might’ve rocked in *Better Off Dead*—it’s got just the right amount of retro garish, and it’s toasty, to boot! penfieldusa.com



CLICK ON THESE

Live on Blender.com—now!

Soulja Boy vs. Gears of War 2

The snap-addicted, Segway-owning Atlanta rap phenom reviews the year’s hottest console shooter for us. Crank dat boomshot, baby!

Juke Bucks

In which *Blender* finances a lucky artist’s romp through a jukebox and catches the sing-along mayhem on video. Up now: New York indie weirdos Yeasayer.

Fall Out Boy

Check out exclusive video from our cover shoot and 100 percent Wentztastic bonus materials.





ALL NEW MON DAYS

DESTROYED IN SECONDS

Planes collide,
tornadoes strike and
things go 'BOOM!'

8PM^E_P

ONE WAY OUT

Will escape artist
Jonathan Goodwin
get out or get hurt?

9PM^E_P

MAN VS WILD

Bear's back and
putting a smackdown
on Mother Nature.

10PM^E_P

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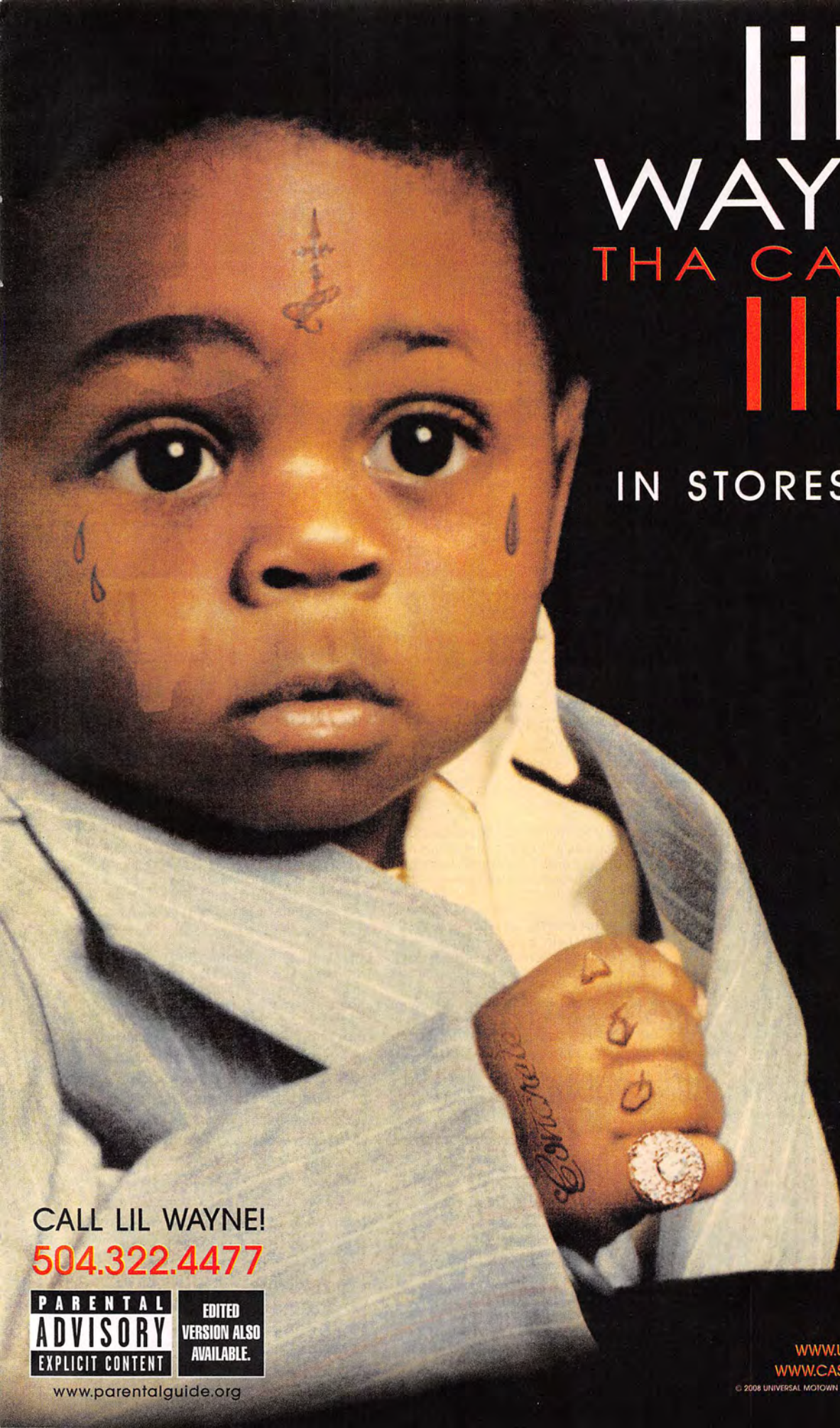
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We've Got

mail

Because sharing is caring

Katy Perry sure likes to talk—in our November cover story (“Girl on Girl”) she mouthed off on everything from religious fundamentalism to her “thug” boyfriend, Travis McCoy, to the cast of *The Hills*. So it’s no surprise that we got a lot of reader comments about the sassy singer. But our favorite one came via e-mail from a gloomy young man identifying himself only as Galen, who provided us with a link to his brooding cover of “I Kissed a Girl.” “I’m a bad person, and I’ve created an abomination,” Galen writes. We heartily disagree—check it out (YouTube “I Kissed a Girl” + “tragic”); it’s goth-tastic!



KISS-UP

Thanks for your article on the delightful Katy Perry. People who complain that “I Kissed a Girl” is phony or exploitative are missing the point. It’s just a really fun, catchy pop song that’s destined to become a karaoke classic. Also, any girl who loves puppies and wants to be a drag queen is tops in my book.

NINA EMKIN, BROOKLYN, NY

NOVEMBER SPAWNED A MOCKER

Was November 2008 your Boring Issue? Generic female pop star Katy Perry, who can only garner attention by singing a superficial bi-curious anthem, adorns the cover. Features include an utterly worthless story on T-Pain (“Pain’s World”), a standard-issue bling-encrusted R&B singer, and a piece on an *American Idol* winner whose name I have already

forgotten (“Tip Your Idol”). The masterstroke was the back page on the frontman of Hinder (“Who Does Austin Winkler Think He Is?”), a band that makes Nickelback seem legit.

JORDAN LOWERY, DALLAS

PROJECT RUN AWAY!

The outfit Katy Perry is wearing on the cover of your November issue looks like a place mat you might make in kindergarten using leftover holiday ribbons. Or the remnants of some Christmas gift crocheted by a half-blind aunt. I get the feeling someone on the *Blender* staff won a bet when they got Katy to put it on.

JAVELIN ELLIOTT, MINNEAPOLIS

THANKS FOR THE LETTER. MR. BLACKWELL IS SURELY SMILING DOWN ON YOU FROM BITCHY-FASHION-CRITIC HEAVEN.

OUR FACT-CHECKING CUZ

There was an error in your “Stairway to Heaven or Highway to Hell” chart (Burner, October): Brian “Head” Welch was *not* the bassist for Korn, but the lead guitarist. The bass player’s name is Fieldy, and he is still with Korn.

DOYLE HANCOCK, CORPUS CHRISTI, TX

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

In your article on Isaac Hayes (Burner, November) you mention the late soul singer’s influence on song titles like Radiohead’s “Myxomatosis.” But *myxomatosis* isn’t a made-up word—it’s a viral disease of rabbits. Duh!

CRAIG ROCKEY, YPSILANTI, MI

WE NEVER SAID IT WAS MADE-UP—ONLY “LENGTHY” AND “ESOTERIC.” SPEAKING OF MADE-UP WORDS: YPSILANTI?

IF POP STARS WERE DOGS ...



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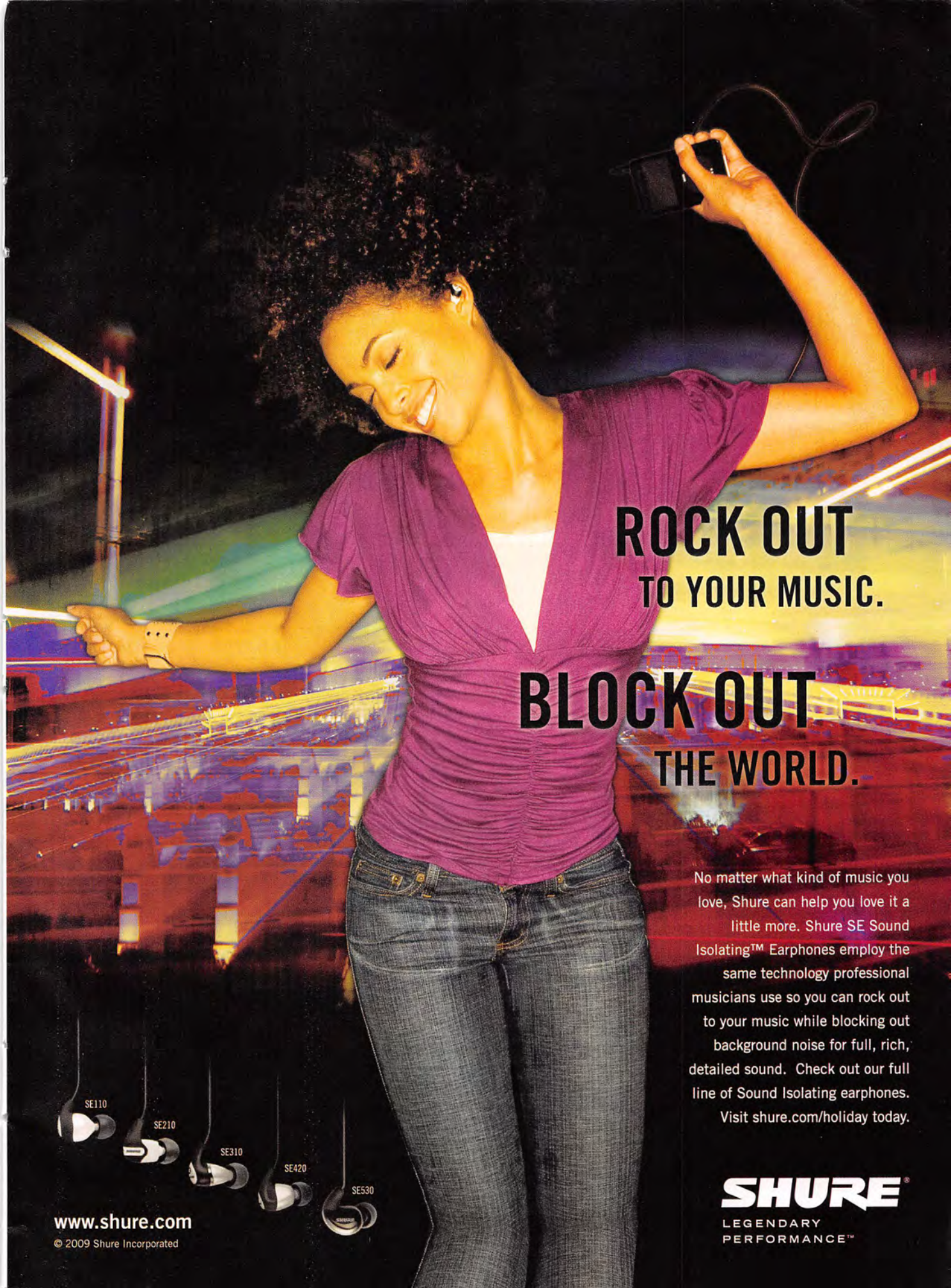
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BURNER



THE OPEN-FACED JANWICH



THE FANG BANGER



THE POP PUCKER



THE HOT LICK

FACE THE MUSIC

WHAT IS IT ABOUT STADIUMS FULL OF FANS THAT BRINGS OUT THE FREAKIEST **O-FACES**, **OVERBITES**, **PUCKERS** AND **TONGUE WAGS** IN OUR FAVORITE ROCK GODS? BY JON COPLON

In this golden age of gossip blogs and behind-the-scenes Flash video footage, pop stars are hyperaware of their image, right down to those looks of utter constipation on their faces during heartfelt choruses or blazing arpeggios. They know that we know that they know. Mug makers such as John Mayer and every member of Metallica have mastered the art of the rock face, putting new twists and quivers on classic time-honored grimaces. But what exactly are they trying to tell us with those hideous glowers? We've enlisted facial-coding expert and *Emotionomics* author Dan Hill to help us catalogue the looks and feel the pain of our pop idols. »



FACE

ORIGIN

EXPERT ANALYSIS

THE POP PUCKER



Pioneered by Mick Jagger, this go-to mug first appeared in the U.S. during the Rolling Stones' 1964 performance on *The Hollywood Palace* variety show.

"Stewart's jaw thrust is aggressive, but his inner eyebrows are raised, suggesting melancholy. When, by contrast, the eyebrows are arched down and together—what I call snake eyes—the face is tighter and the whole expression is more assertive and tied together. The dominant emotion is anger. The raised upper lip with a jaw lift conveys slight anger, but this is complete disgust on Britney's face."



Britney Spears



Rod Stewart



Kid Sister



Chad Kroeger

FACE

ORIGIN

EXPERT ANALYSIS

THE HOT LICK



At 23, Chaim Witz rechristened himself Gene Simmons, wagged his serpentine tongue and changed the face of rock in the early '70s with Kiss.

"A tongue show like this is generally considered to be a sign of displeasure or disagreement, but without any other cues, it can be a meaningless gesture. Lars'—combined with a true smile involving the eyes, as opposed to a social smile which is just around the mouth—can be devilish. But when the eyebrows come down even just a bit, that conveys a slight touch of anger, as well as defiance."



Adam Levine



Lars Ulrich



LL Cool J



Jay-Z

CHECK YOUR HEAD

ROCK-FACE FIELD GUIDE

UNCOVERING HIDDEN AGONY AND ANGER
BEHIND THE FOUR CLASSES OF POP-STAR PUSS



Ben Folds



Taylor Swift



50 Cent



Miley Cyrus

FACE

ORIGIN

EXPERT ANALYSIS

THE FANG BANGER



Nosferatu's trademark was popularized in the Weimar Republic by F.W. Murnau's 1922 silent film; today it's rampant on stateside rock stages.

"An overbite doesn't necessarily indicate one particular emotion, but what's commonly called a 'lip-suck' signals anxiety. You can see that with Miley Cyrus' mouth pulled wide, too. The annoyance in Ben Folds' downturned eyebrows is combined with a smile, so it's almost like he's enjoying being pissed off here. With 50 Cent, the raised upper mouth and the chin lift convey strong anger and disgust."



John Mayer



Bruce Springsteen



Christina Aguilera



Troy Sanders of Mastodon

FACE

ORIGIN

EXPERT ANALYSIS

THE OPEN-FACED JAMWICH



Sometimes known as the O-Face, Elvis' curled-lip mouth-move first inspired a frenzy among female fans in 1954.

"Coupled with the raised eyebrows, this could be a moment of reflection; but it's often showing empathy and sadness. An expression can actually inspire an emotion. The most intense version of anger shows in your mouth—almost like a growling dog, but if you smile long enough, you'll end up feeling happier. That said, I contorted my mouth like Mayer's for a while, and it was just confusing."

SPEARS: FRANK MICELOTTA/CORBIS; STEWART: BRIAN RASCH/CORBIS; KROEGER: ASHLEY MALE/RETNA; LL COOL J: BENNETT RAGLIN/WIREIMAGE; JAY-Z: REUTERS/CORBIS; FOLDS: PHOTO REDUNSKI/CORBIS; SWIFT: JACKIE BUTLER/RETNA; 50 CENT: RAHMY SECURE/RETNA; CYRUS: LESTER COHEN/WIREIMAGE; MAYER: SCOTT LEGATO/RETNA; SPRINGSTEEN: PAUL WHITE/AP PHOTO; AGUILERA: KEVIN MAZUR/WIREIMAGE; SANDERS: ASHLEY MALE/RETNA; ILLUSTRATIONS: JAMESON SIMPSON.

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Clockwise from left:
Bob Hardy,
Alex Kapranos,
Paul Thomson and
Nick McCarthy.



USEFUL TIPS

HOW TO SAVOR A STRAIGHT-RAZOR SHAVE

FOR ROCKERS **FRANZ FERDINAND**'S DAPPER FRONTMAN, ALEX KAPRANOS, STAYING SHARP INVOLVES A BLADE TO THE THROAT BY ELIZABETH GOODMAN • PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN MIDGLEY

TONIGHT:
**FRANZ
FERDINAND**

OUT NOW
Tonight: Franz
Ferdinand
DOMINO/EPIC

1. TRUST NO ONE

"I went for a cutthroat shave in Greece, and the old guy who had been running the place for 60 years used hot towels and this exotic spiced lotion. And as he began shaving me, I noticed there was a big slice where he'd cut himself shaving that morning."

2. SILENCE IS GOLDEN

"There's a difference between a barber and a hairdresser: Hairdressers chatter all the time. *Who cares where I went on my holiday?* A real barber is straight and to the point. And if he's not, you keep your mouth shut, because it's near the sharpest of blades."

3. LUBRICATION IS KEY

"Of all the guys in the band, I think I'd let our bassist Bob Hardy shave me, because he's got a steady hand. Or at least if he's had a couple of gin 'n' tonics, he'd be all right. I know he wouldn't fool around—he would take it very seriously."

4. EMBRACE THE SMOOTH

"Beards are difficult and give me the general air of an escaped sex offender. I tried a pencil mustache when I was 21, but it didn't really come in, so I dyed it. When I finally shaved, the hair dye remained. That was great."

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From left: Gahan, Gore and Fletcher: Guess which one of them just robbed a bodega?

ALL ABOUT OUR ALBUM

Producer
Ben Hillier
Studio
Santa Barbara
Sound Design
Last album
Playing the Angel
This album TBA

IN THE STUDIO

"A SPIRITUAL AURA"

DEPECHE MODE SPLURGE ON NEW TOYS TO SECURE A SPOT ON YOUR SEXY-TIME MIX TAPE

For nearly 30 years, Depeche Mode's dark synth pop has blurred the line between passion and perversion. Who hasn't gotten his freak on to "Master and Servant" or "I Feel You"? Even tween queen Hilary Duff recently bit the monster hook in DM's "Personal Jesus" to declare her graduation into womanhood on "Reach Out."

"I gave permission," says DM's main songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Martin Gore. "It was pretty harmless." But how will he, singer Dave Gahan and keyboardist Andrew Fletcher supply a new generation with sample-ready hookup hits? By sticking to what they know. "We fear change," Gore says while insisting that their 12th studio record "will be just as relevant to fans as *Violator*," the multi-platinum disc that sparked a sellout stadium tour.

"The overall album fits in with the line of the last few records—it's kind of an amalgamation," Gore says, attributing the mishmash

to decades' worth of toys the Mode men have at their disposal. "I did the demos on a laptop. It's quick and frees you up so you don't have to run around plugging things in." He had 18 songs (Gahan penned four) by the time they got to the studio, where he tapped into his own and producer Ben Hillier's analog-synth collections. And Gore reckons he has bought "virtually every drum machine ever built" for use on the new album, which features everything from live and sampled drum sounds to booming 808 bass.

Gore played some guitar, too, and he and Gahan spent lots of time on reverb-coated vocal harmonies. Lyrics-wise, "there wasn't a specific theme, but there is a spiritual aura to them—I tend to say that a lot when we put records out, but it's more so this time," he admits. "We're still writing the same song with a different twist to it each time, hoping no one will notice." MIKAEL WOOD

ALSO IN THE STUDIO

Guitar heroes **AEROSMITH** are polishing material for their first album of originals since 2001, due for a late-2009 release. • "Superstar" rapper **LUPE FIASCO** says he

might retire after unleashing a three-CD set called *LupEND*. • Off the treadmill and into the studio: **OK GO** are recording in upstate New York for the tentatively titled *Help Is on the Way*, due in the summer.

• **TAKING BACK SUNDAY** are adding the vocals and guitar work of Matt Fazzi and the production of David Kahne (Sublime, the Strokes) to the mix for a yet-untitled spring record.



BLENDER'S BURNING QUESTION
HOW WILL MADONNA REBOUND FROM HER GUY RITCHIE DIVORCE?

13%

By making *Sex II*

40%

Orphan-shopping spree in Malawi

30%

Drunk-dialing Sean Penn

17%

Endless Pilates

Reader Wisdom
"Vegas, baby!"
—Rick Greenteaf, Chicago



Log on to Blender.com for the next Burning Question. One reader will have his/her brilliant comment published in the magazine and win the **Starplex full-size, wood Guitar Hero/Rock Band controller by Peak Products**. For contest rules, see Blender.com.



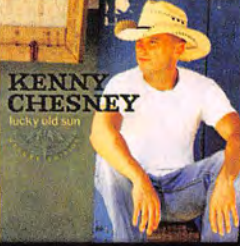
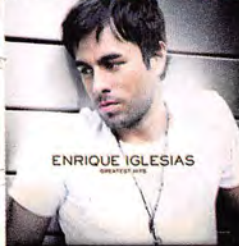
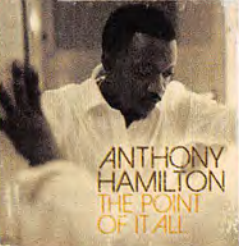
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EURYTHM METHOD

SWEET DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS

NO ONE OOZES SEX LIKE EURYTHMICS' DAVE STEWART, BUT HIS DIAMOND-STUDDED VIBRATOR IS HARDLY THE FIRST ROCKER-INSPIRED ADULT TOY. ILLUSTRATION BY CARLO GIOVANI



1. Dave Stewart

Little Something Tonight (\$195–\$2,000)

"I wanted to create something that would be accepted, almost like jewelry, and not just pulled out like a big purple throbbing thing," says songwriter and producer Dave Stewart, who sells his vibes at what he terms his London "sensuality shop," Coco de Mer; they're part of his Rock Fabulous lifestyle brand and are paired with an original song and video in ads. "This is a great entry point that really could expand," he explains. Um ... that's what she said?

2. Samantha Fox

The Sam Fox Breast Enlarger (\$30)

What sounds like your teenage dream job is actually a machine designed "to increase the size of your boobs quickly and noticeably." Or at least those of ladies wanting the famed rack of the former topless model turned '80s singer of "Naughty Girls (Need Love Too)."

3. U2

Zooropa Condoms (\$37 for two)

"Electronically tested," lubricated rubbers were distributed in black packaging with "no baby" symbols. Alas, any left in circulation expired in '96.

4. Warren Cuccurullo

Rock Rod (\$59.99)

It's his ex-bandmate Simon LeBon who plowed through models, but the former Duran Duran guitarist became a porn star and marketed a self-molded eight-inch dildo.

5. KISS

KISS Kondoms (\$4.95 for a three-pack)

"Sex is always embarrassing, so when a guy whips out a KISS condom and there's Gene Simmons' tongue hanging out, it lightens up the situation," Simmons said. And completely kills the mood.



DO YOU ROCK?

JIM JONES

He's recently taken his act to Off-Broadway, which makes us wonder, does the "Ballin'" rapper indeed rock?

EVER TRASHED A HOTEL ROOM?

WHEN DON'T I TRASH A HOTEL ROOM? I'VE BEEN BANNED FROM CERTAIN HOTEL ENTITIES ENTIRELY.

BIGGEST CELEB IN YOUR CELL PHONE? THE WEED MAN.

CRAZIEST THING ON YOUR RIDER? RED STARBURST. IT'S MY FAVORITE COLOR.

DO PLAYERS REALLY STAR IN OFF-BROADWAY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PLAYS?

CHICKS LIKE DUDES WHO CAN PULL OFF A PLAY. I'M SHOWING I'M VULNERABLE.

BEST RUMOR ABOUT YOURSELF?

I READ ON A BLOG THAT I WAS GAY WHEN I WAS HANGING WITH PUFFY.

IS THERE A STRIPPER POLE IN YOUR HOUSE?

MY LADY BOUGHT IT FOR ME TWO CHRISTMASSES AGO. WE'RE HAPPILY INVOLVED; I'LL PROBABLY GET HER AN ENGAGEMENT RING THIS YEAR.

CAN YOU TEACH ME TO BALL?

BALLIN' IS A TWO-STAGE PROCESS: 1. MAKE SURE YOUR BILLS ARE PAID AND THE KIDS ARE TAKEN CARE OF. 2. TAKE THE REST OF YOUR MONEY AND GO ABSOLUTELY STUPID-BUNUDU-BUKU-DUMB WITH IT.

VERDICT!

PLATONIC WEB SURFING WITH PUFFY? WEED ON SPEED DIAL? JONES ROCKS STUPID BUKU AMOUNTS.

JON COPLON

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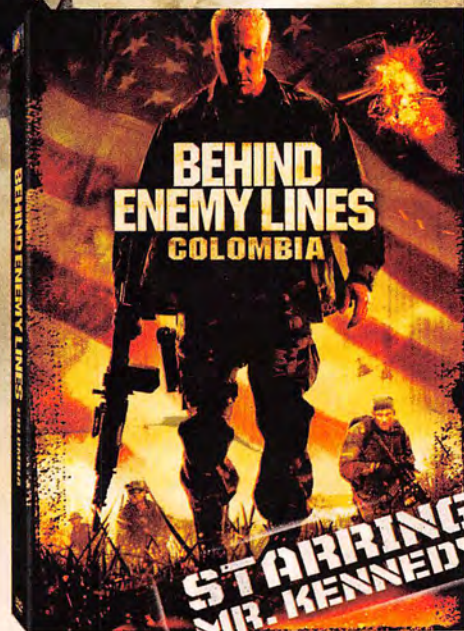


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ALMOST FAMOUS ELECTRIK RED

FOUR SULTRY SINGERS DISCOVER THE DIRTY SOUTH
BY WAY OF THE GREAT WHITE NORTH

BY SEAN EVANS • PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM FEDDERLY

It's not your typical R&B group that can hole up in a Las Vegas recording studio and bang out a debut record in two weeks—the length of an average Sin City marriage. So how did “effortlessly ghetto chic” quartet Elektrik Red do it? “We shook our balls,” says tall, sexy-shy singer Sarah Rosete. Sorry, balls? “Mmm hmm,” she purrs. “Big balls. *Stugots*.” As in *guts*, she clarifies an awkward moment later.

They might be the most musically proficient women to ever inspire drunken bar-top dancing and bad decisions—the subject matter of their first video and single, “Drink in My Cup,” a faux-Dirty South rhyme with a dark, sizzurp-drenched melody from

power producers Tricky Stewart and The-Dream (Rihanna’s “Umbrella”). A classically schooled pianist, Rosete met Naomi Allen at performing-arts school in Canada. “We had extensive vocal training together,” Allen says. “We had a dreadful instrument class, learning the xylophone, metallophone and glockenspiel. We’d wait away in school shows. Parents would leave or check their cell phones when it was our turn. It was the worst!” Meanwhile, in New York, Lesley Lewis (the group’s drill sergeant) and Kyndra Reevey (a.k.a. Binkie, the Scary Spice of the bunch)—“She has no filter,” Allen says) met on the high school dance circuit and forged a fast friendship. The crew came together as backup dancers for Ciara and Usher and quietly worked up their own material, too. And then those famed balls came into play.

After five years dancing in everything from Miller Lite commercials to BET specials, the girls got a chance to perform for L.A. Reid, the chairman of Island/Def Jam, while he chewed on an unlit cigar. “We gave him a razzle-dazzle show,” Lewis says. Contracts, as the story goes, were signed the next day, followed by the quick Vegas sessions. “Now I just want to get out there and dance to it,” Allen says with a toothy grin, “and shake my balls.”

ALL ABOUT US!

Favorite place to dance?

Allen: “If we’re not in the club, we’re dancing on our chairs in restaurants.”

Best hidden talent?

Reevey: “I’m Kung Fu Binkie. If someone messes with one of my girls, I have to karate-chop him in the head.”

What’s the drink in your cup?

Rosete: “I use the Goose to get loose. Or the Ciroc Obama, which is really just a vodka-cranberry.”

OUT NOW *Elektrik Red* [DEF JAM]



From left: Binkie, Sarah, Lesley and Naomi, the caboose, form an Elektrik Red choo-choo.

STYLING: ERIN HIRSH FOR THEMAGNETAGENCY.COM; HAIR: GISELLE MODESTE; MAKEUP: JO BAKER/ARTMIXBEAUTY.COM/DIOR; CLOTHING: BINKIE: BLAZER AND CORSET; LLOYD KLEIN; LEGGINGS: AMERICAN APPAREL; HEELS: CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN; SARAH: JACKET: VINTAGE; DRESS: EUCICO COVEN; LEGGINGS: BRIAN LICHTENBERG; HEELS: CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN; LESLEY: TANK: TOP AND SKIRT: SIMONE; HEELS: KOVA 9; HEELS: CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN.

AKONOMICS

ROCK-STAR STIMULUS PACKAGE

HOW HAVE MUSIC'S BIGGEST NAMES POSITIONED THEMSELVES TO PULL THROUGH THE LOOMING ECONOMIC APOCALYPSE? • BY MARK SPITZ

CONSERVATIVE

MODERATE

AGGRESSIVE



➤ **Nickelback, Shakira:** Took cash up front for Live Nation concert deals and bearishly hoarded gold records.

Michael Jackson: Reportedly booked his first recording sessions in seven years at a Vegas casino (where breakfast is comped).

Björk: Heeding U.S. lessons, she criticized her native Iceland's investments,

writing, "If we build two more aluminium smelters, Iceland would become the biggest aluminium smelter in the world... if the price of aluminium falls... it would be catastrophic."

Led Zeppelin: Plowed ahead with reunion plans, sans Robert Plant, who continues to show little interest in derivatives and commodities.

➤ **Diddy:** Diversified his reality-TV portfolio with *I Want to Work for Diddy* but laid off 40 percent of his girl group Danity Kane (firing D. Woods and Aubrey O'Day) and grounded his private plane.

Akon: Palled around with billionaire Warren Buffett and proclaimed his wish to dine with

Donald Trump, "cause he could show me how to invest in property and make even more money." Saved on civil-suit damages by assaulting absolutely zero fans in 2008.

Young Jeezy: Released '08 album *The Recession* featuring laissez-faire rap "Circulate."

➤ **Madonna, U2, Jay-Z:** Took millions of shares of Live Nation stock in exchange for exclusive touring and merchandising deals, signaling bullish long-term views. The mega-promoter's stocks dipped 3.8 percent in mid-October, dimming net worth of Madonna, U2 and Jay-Z, and cutting into Guy Ritchie's alimony payments.

Janet Jackson: Ignoring dismal sales for her recent *Discipline* album, launched a bubble-era arena tour with pyrotechnics and costume changes. Despite irrational exuberance, law of supply and demand prevailed: Jackson played arenas at one-third capacity until her tour collapsed, creating talks of a possible merger with her brothers in '09.

CASH, MONEY, WOES

Sound advice for rolling with the recession

"Let everything fail and rebuild everything from the ground up."



—Pat Wilson, Weezer drummer

"We ain't going to the party and frivolously buying 20 bottles no more. We're learning how to do it the way the Arabs do."



—Busta Rhymes, rapper on "Arab Money"

"Analyst Robert Prechter Jr. used song lyrics to gauge mass psychology and base his market forecasts on it. By his logic, we just need a real doom- and-gloom song to hit the charts. That will mean we have hit the bottom. So, let's all try and give Eyehategod a hit single."



—Pink Eyes, Fucked Up vocalist

WEIRD BAND ALERT

PREVIOUSLY ON LOST

Meet the Gilligan and Skipper of TV-show-recap rock

SO, EACH OF YOUR SONGS SUMMARIZES THE PLOT OF AN EPISODE OF *LOST*? "J.J. ABRAMS IS OUR MUSE; WE HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF HIS WORK,"

CONFIDES JEFF CURTIN, 25. "HE'S OUR L. RON HUBBARD AND OUR JESUS CHRIST PUT TOGETHER. AND OUR STEPHEN KING."

YOU AND TOM CRUISE, BOTH; BUT WHO INFLUENCES YOUR SOUND? "WE LOVE MARITIME-THEMED DISNEY MUSIC," SAYS CURTIN, AN AUDIO ENGINEER BY DAY WHOSE PARTNER IN CRIME, ADAM SCHATZ, 20, IS AN UNDERGRAD AT NYU. THEY RECORDED SONGS IN THEIR

BROOKLYN BEDROOMS WITH "TOY PIANOS AND LITTLE SHAKERS THAT WERE LYING AROUND."

HOW DID YOU TWO MEET? "THROUGH A FRIEND. WE STARTED WRITING THIS EPIC SCI-FI SPACE OPERA/BALLET" CURTIN SAYS. "WE HAD THE IDEA TO WRITE ANOTHER OPERA ABOUT *LOST*, BUT INSTEAD WE DECIDED TO GO EPISODE BY EPISODE, LIKE BLOGGERS. OUR MOTTO IS 'WE RECAPS WHAT WE SEES.'" JON COPLIN



Schatz (left) and Curtin: No band is an island.

24 YEARS
AGO
THIS
MONTH

FEBRUARY



The Cosby Show is the highest-rated program on TV.

Madonna's *Like a Virgin* reaches No. 1.



Melle Mel becomes the first hip-hop artist to perform at the Grammys.

Beverly Hills Cop tops the box office.



US Attorney Rudy Giuliani indicts Mob bosses in New York.



Coca-Cola introduces **Cherry Coke**.

GREATEST SONGS EVER LEONARD COHEN "HALLELUJAH"

HOW THE CANADIAN GLOOMSTER'S ODE TO ALL HE COULDN'T COMPREHEND BECAME A TOWERING, SPIRITUAL ANTHEM **BY DAVID PEISNER**

By 1984, Leonard Cohen had spent nearly 20 years beating his relationship traumas and existential aches into brooding folk songs. He'd won praise as a poet and novelist, released six acclaimed records, wooed a succession of famous femme fatales including Janis Joplin and Nico and established himself as the patron saint of clove-smoking, bohemian depressives everywhere—rock's coolest Jew this side of Bob Dylan. And yet, writing songs proved a monumental pain in the tuchus.

Holed up in a New York hotel to work on his seventh album, *Various Positions*, Cohen struggled with one tune: "Hallelujah." "I filled two notebooks with the song," Cohen has said. "I remember being on the carpet of the Royalton in my underwear, banging my head on the floor, saying, 'I can't finish.'"

The song mixed biblical imagery with erotic impulses—a favorite cocktail for Cohen—as it tiptoed the line between salvation and despair. To Cohen, it was ultimately a celebration of powerlessness. "The world is full of things that cannot be reconciled," he has said. "But there

are moments when we can embrace the whole mess: 'I don't understand a fucking thing at all—Hallelujah!'" Recording in a Manhattan studio above a nudie bar called the Metropole ("The guy out front would always be trying to get us in to see the strippers," recalls producer John Lissauer), Cohen traded his typical somber-dude-with-a-guitar arrangements for a Euro-tinged, cabaret-assman persona. Slick keyboards and a spare rhythm section lead Cohen's grim baritone through the verses before the chorus opens up with a swell of backing singers. "He had just discovered the Casio keyboard," Lissauer says. "Somebody had given it to him as a toy, but he found it so easy to write to." The song came together smoothly—then almost disappeared entirely. After what Lissauer terms "a pissing match" with Cohen's manager, the label refused to release *Various*

Positions in the U.S. It finally appeared on shelves the following February.

Ever since, covers have proliferated. In 1994, Jeff Buckley released a version, which owed much to a somber read John Cale had recorded for a 1991 tribute collection. Cale's cover drew wide attention when it soundtracked the romantic yearnings of a large green ogre in 2001's *Shrek*, but Buckley's plaintive take has sunk deepest into the public consciousness. "I first fell for the Buckley version," Fall Out Boy's Pete Wentz tells *Blender*. Wentz was listening to the tune as he swallowed a handful of Ativan in a 2005 suicide attempt; he later quoted it in "Hum Hallelujah." "It's been one of my favorite songs for a long time. You can just sit in the dark and listen to it over and over." TV shows like

The O.C. and *The West Wing* have used "Hallelujah" to amplify the upheavals of the unreasonably attractive. And covers continue to crop up: Besides notable takes by Rufus Wainwright and Bono, the song was also reworked by *American Idol* finalist Jason Castro in 2008, subsequently boosting Buckley's "Hallelujah" to a top slot on iTunes, and stripping the song of its "cult hit" status once and for all. "At this point, it's a cliché," says *O.C.* and *Gossip Girl* creator Josh Schwartz. "But in 10 years, somebody else will do an incredible version, and it will live on. It's timeless." **B**

VITAL STATISTICS

Album *Various Positions*
Label PVC
Performers Leonard Cohen (vocals), John Lissauer (keyboards), Sid McGinnis (guitar), Richard Crooks (drums), John Crowder (bass), Crowder, Erin Dickens, Crissie Faith, Ron Getman, Lani Groves, Yvonne Lewis, Lissauer, Merle Miller, Anjani Thomas (backing vocals)
Writer Cohen
Producer Lissauer
Chart debut none
Highest chart position N/A



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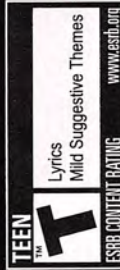
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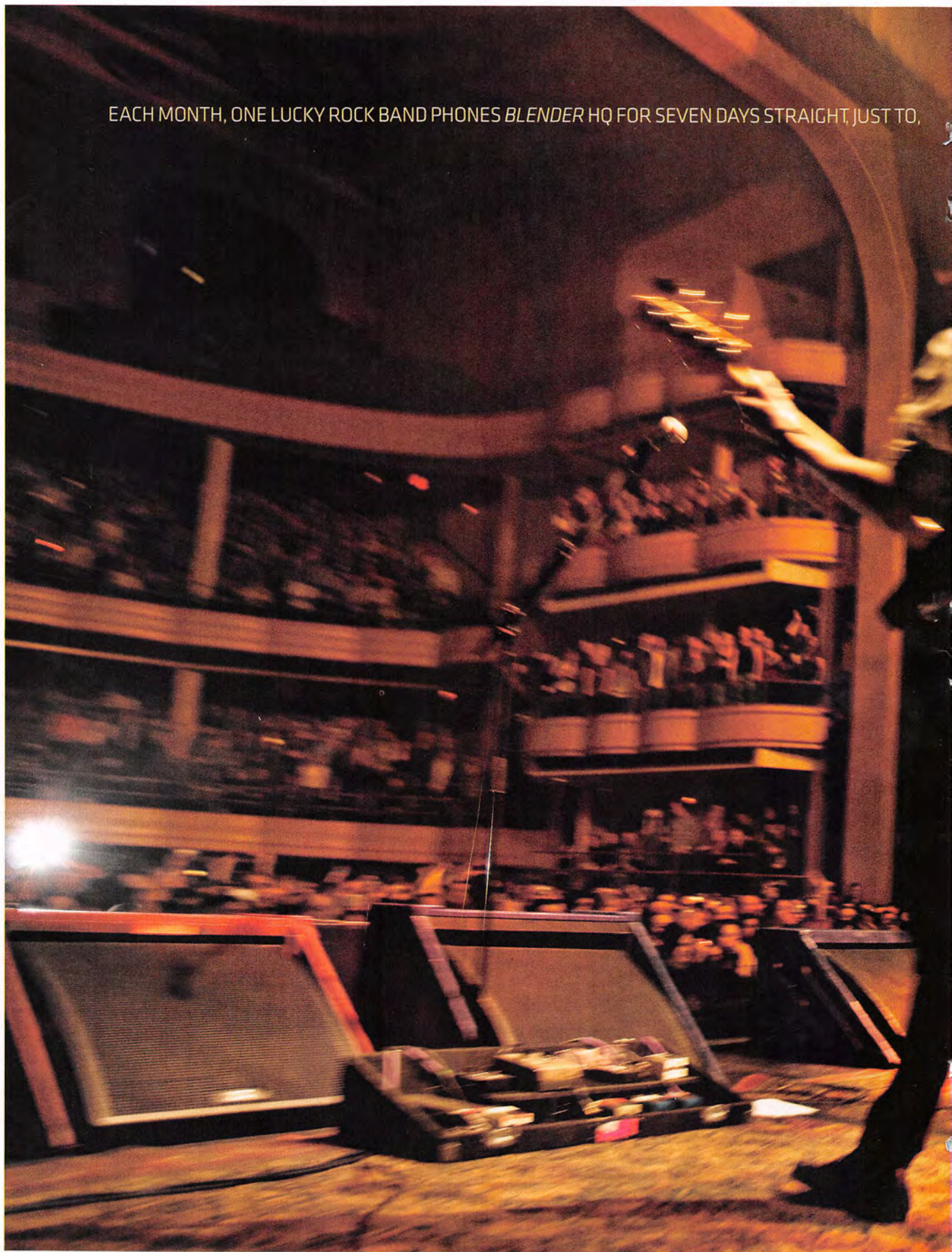
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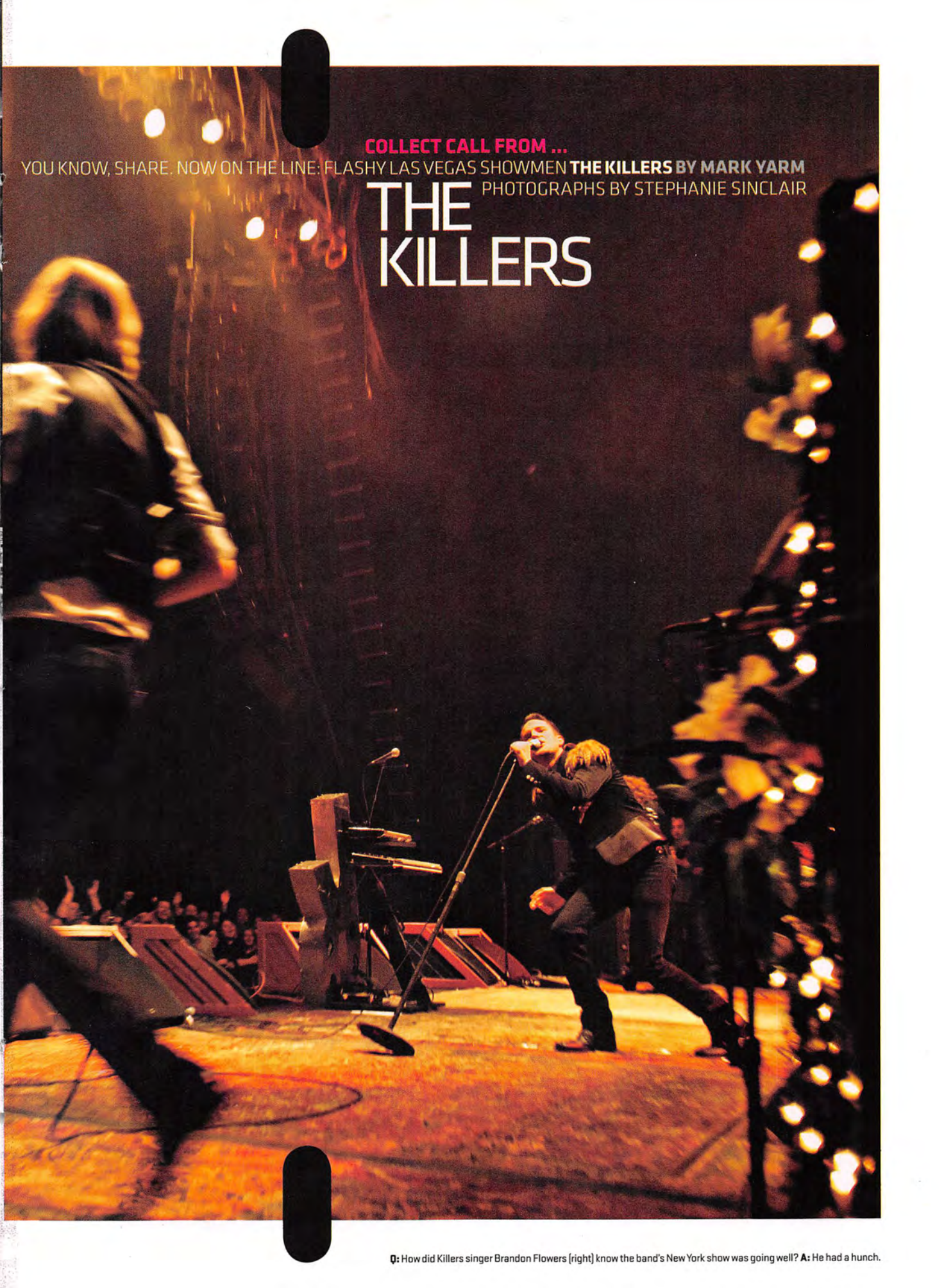


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EACH MONTH, ONE LUCKY ROCK BAND PHONES *BLENDER* HQ FOR SEVEN DAYS STRAIGHT, JUST TO,





COLLECT CALL FROM ...

YOU KNOW, SHARE. NOW ON THE LINE: FLASHY LAS VEGAS SHOWMEN **THE KILLERS** BY MARK YARM
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHANIE SINCLAIR

THE KILLERS

Q: How did Killers singer Brandon Flowers (right) know the band's New York show was going well? **A:** He had a hunch.

5:45 P.M.



Flowers at soundcheck. [Disclaimer: No giant green tigers were harmed in the making of this backdrop.]



Flowers was all smiles until he ran out of quarters for the massage chair.

DAY 1

OCTOBER 22, 3:02 P.M.

Drummer Ronnie Vannucci phones from Vegas as he sets out on a month-long international tour.

"I sold a car this morning! My brother and I wanted to see what I could get for my old VW Beetle. I told the guy it was very rare—a '59½, one of only 30 to come out of the plant before they switched to the official 1960 model. I sold it for 15 grand, and it's only worth three. I drove away, then called him up and said, 'Listen, I owe you 12 grand.' We met back up, and I wrote him a check for \$12,000. Right when he's saying 'What the fuck?' I was out of there.

"Now my brother's wife is driving me to the airport. The two mongrel kids you hear in the background are my nieces. My wife's staying home—I got a girlfriend meeting me on tour ... And now my sister-in-law is punching me for the girlfriend joke."

DAY 2

OCTOBER 23, 6:03 P.M.

Guitarist Dave Keuning interrupts a romantic afternoon in New York to call us.

"I flew in last night and went straight to the hotel. I was messing with my guitar,

practicing a few songs. I also came up with the beginnings of something, a little riff. Then I ordered a salad from room service. Man, that sounds so gay!

"I'm at the ice-skating rink in Central Park. I had to take a break because the Zamboni is out. I haven't ice-skated in, like, 20 years, but I haven't fallen yet. I'm skating with a girl—not my girlfriend, but a friend who's a girl. It's like a date. As soon as the Zamboni leaves, I'm gonna try a triple lutz. I just can't injure my wrist, because we've got a show tomorrow."

DAY 3

OCTOBER 24, 6:43 P.M.

Frontman Brandon Flowers rings us from New York after soundchecking for the evening's performance.

"The soundcheck was pretty flawless. We probably have better soundchecks than gigs. For me, New York is a place of work. Earlier, I met with my tailor here, Joseph, for about an hour. People in Las Vegas can't really get their heads around how tight I want something to be—it blows their minds. But Joseph, he understands me.

"Then later I called my wife and son. His name is Ammon—he's almost 16 months.

This will be the longest I've ever gone without seeing him. When I came home last time after being gone for a few weeks, I was holding him and he wouldn't look at me. He was giving me the cold shoulder. There was no love. Now my wife puts the phone up to his ear and I do some baby-talking. And we do the video iChat thing—but he doesn't quite get it."

DAY 4

OCTOBER 25, 6:06 P.M.

An hour after waking up, a slightly worse-for-wear Vannucci calls from the lobby of his hotel in New York.

"I didn't go to sleep until seven in the morning. It was one of those nights. I did whiskey shots until the sun came up—somewhere between 10 and 13. I made friends with a couple of girls who work at the hotel, and we hit four or five places. Throughout the night, we would pick up people and lose people, so you had this changing of the guard every couple of hours. At one bar, this girl who worked there came up to me like she knew me. Not two minutes into our conversation, she was showing me yoga moves in this very short skirt. An extremely flexible



Drummer Ronnie Vannucci crams for his Morse-code midterm.



Guitarist Dave Keuning. [Not pictured: awesome guitar face.]



Bassist Mark Stoermer nails his Excedrin commercial audition.



The Killers would later regret checking their 401(k) statements right before the big show.

woman. I got out of there when it was getting weird. Eventually the hotel girls went home, and I went to an after party at the hotel with the rest of the band.

"It was a long night."

DAY 5

OCTOBER 27, 11:05 P.M.

After missing a day due to intercontinental scheduling complications, Keuning phones us from the Paris set of the French TV show *Taratata*.

"The taping went good. We played 'Somebody Told Me' and 'Human,' and Brandon and Ronnie did an interview. They asked about lyrics, and we don't necessarily like to say what the lyrics mean—or maybe we don't know what they mean. The host, who was supposed to be witty and intellectual and French, was accusing them of protecting themselves because they didn't want to answer his questions.

"I haven't done a whole lot since getting to France. I was jet-lagged and slept from 4 P.M. yesterday until 1 A.M. this morning. I couldn't go back to bed, so I started watching *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. And I went to the

gym at five in the morning and worked out for an hour. The rest of the day was spent doing the TV show. I want to go walk in the park by the Louvre, but I'm running out of time. Basically, I'm a room-service guy who stays in and watches *Terminator*."

DAY 6

OCTOBER 28, 7:33 P.M.

Vannucci calls from the small Paris club the band will be playing later that evening.

"I'm still jet-lagged, so it doesn't feel like I'm here right now. On the flight from New York we hit a storm and the plane was getting jostled around like Michael Flatley's nutsack. I didn't sleep much.

"I've been to France many times but never been fucked with like I was fucked with the other day. I went to have a bite to eat at this little café. This fucking waiter—a meaty French guy who looked like a cross between Jean-Claude Van Damme and Jim Carrey's Grinch—pulls out the table to get me in, and then he pushes the table in on my knees. I said, 'Hey, you're hurting my knees,' and he basically said in French, 'I don't give a

fuck.' And then he proceeded to sell me bad food and an expensive soft drink.

"After the show, I might rage—fuckin' put on a beret and take my shirt off."

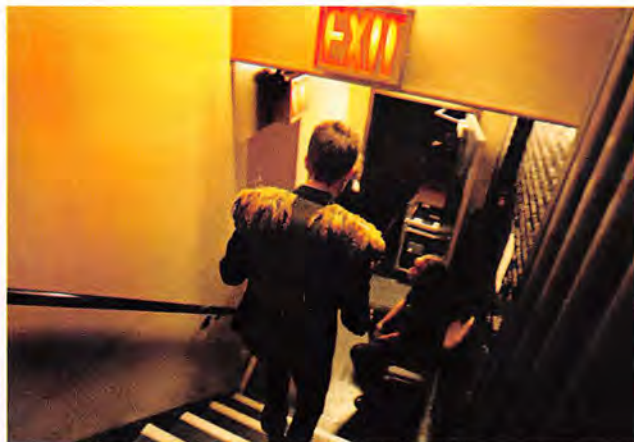
DAY 7

OCTOBER 29, 10:02 P.M.

On our final day together, Flowers gives us a ring from his hotel room in London.

"Yesterday's gig was really fantastic. The French didn't dig our last album, *Sam's Town*—almost every other country loved it, but in France we saw a massive decline. They're back on board with this one. I was confident about *Sam's Town*, even though it didn't get the greatest reviews. That's my biggest problem with America—I have a big chip on my shoulder. When I do an interview in Europe I get treated with respect, like I'm David Byrne. They love our ambition, they want us to do well. But not in America. I take it personally. We're still learning, you know?

"But it's not like the Killers are some tragedy. We're a platinum band, after all. And so far, the reviews are light-years better. It already feels like things are turning around." **B**



"I just flew in from Las Vegas, and boy, is my jacket tired."



The Killers kill the crowd. (Note to lawyers: It's just a metaphor.)

9:15 P.M.

DEAR SUPERSTAR

SLASH

THE VELVET REVOLVER AND EX-GUNS N' ROSES GUITARIST THINKS DRUGS ARE BAD AND THE NEW GNR SINGLE IS GOOD. WAIT, MAYBE WE GOT THAT BACKWARD ...

BY RICHARD CROMELIN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIERNEY GEARON

S

SLASH ARRIVES IN SANTA MONICA HALF AN hour late, and before we can even start, the guy needs some powder. But not heroin or coke—both of which he's held as close as a guitar during his frantic stint as a drug abuser—just a light cosmetic dusting, "So I don't look shiny," he tells a makeup artist.

Born Saul Hudson to a biracial couple who worked in the entertainment business, Slash was a guitar hero for the generation before *Guitar Hero*. Since leaving Guns N' Roses more than 12 years ago, he has recorded two albums with his Guns-minus-Axl band, Velvet Revolver; written a self-titled ▶





Slash's clever way to
stop smoking cigarettes:
by smoking even
more cigarettes!

memoir that details his legendary excesses, all the way back to a childhood friendship with original GNR drummer Steven Adler; played on hundreds of records; smoked thousands of Marlboros; and, for the last two and a half years, been sober. Instead of dragging in with a hangover, he's upbeat and relaxed after an overnight trip to Disneyland with his wife, Perla Hudson, and their kids, London, 6, and Cash, 4.

At 43, this all-new Slash now looks—well, he still looks every bit the Hollywood street crawler: curly hair spilling from the top hat, black T-shirt (with FUCK YOU spelled out in the design of the Monkees' guitar-shaped logo), black jeans, battered sneakers. He has written music for a new solo album, which will enlist a roster of guest singers and will compete with Velvet Revolver (who are currently searching for a new singer, after the departure of the increasingly Axl-ish Scott Weiland) as his main focus.

Like a lot of recovering users, Slash keeps a busy schedule to minimize boredom and downtime. He played guitar for the Mickey Rourke film *The Wrestler* and scored Mexican director Olallo Rubio's *This Is Not a Movie*. And he has added new tracks with Alice Cooper and Cypress Hill to a career-long history of diverse collaborations, from Michael Jackson to Motörhead, Spinal Tap to Eazy-E, Diddy to Ray Charles. He may well be the Kevin Bacon of rock music.

"I'm a hyperactive workaholic," he explains, reading a BlackBerry message from his injured friend Travis Barker as he settles onto the wooden bench of an outdoor terrace—Marlboros and a glass of water at the ready. It's quickly evident that sobriety hasn't squashed his leather-pants attitude: He bats away one reader's inquiry and says, "These questions only get better, I take it." Well ...

■ **Back in the day, who got the most women in Guns N' Roses?**

SQUIRRELMELT, MANCHESTER, NH
Probably Steven, but then Steven would fuck anything that moved.

■ **Where's the strangest place you ever woken up, and with whom?**

DAVE_ZAIF, LA JOLLA, CA
I once woke up in a rental van I'd been driving, in the middle of the street, North Edinburgh Avenue between Willoughby and Santa Monica in West Hollywood, with some girl I'd picked up at a club the night before.

No, Slash's T-shirt, fuck you!



"I DON'T HAVE A PROBLEM WITH DRUGS, JUST WITH PEOPLE WHO ABUSE DRUGS."

I'd stopped there for some reason and then passed out.

■ **What's the worst hangover you've ever had? What did you do to cure it?**

STRUMMRMAN12, LLOYDMINSTER, ALBERTA, CANADA
The worst hangover was when I was 12 or 13—my dad and a bunch of his friends had a party and made this insane punch. Steven and myself got into the punch. And I learned that the cure to a hangover was to keep drinking. That's probably what kick-started years and years of binge drinking. It turned into a 24/7 party from that day on.

■ **What's harder, playing the "November Rain" guitar solo onstage or on *Guitar Hero III*?**

NECKFASE89, HELENA, MT
It's harder on *Guitar Hero*. Being good at guitar doesn't translate to playing *Guitar Hero*. Actually, you can play *Guitar Hero* better if you don't play guitar. It's a muscle coordination that is a world unto itself.

■ **When you were a kid, you stole everything from exotic snakes to an inflatable raft. What's the most expensive score you ever made and how did you do it?**

NOVUMBRELLA, SEATTLE
I went through a klepto period out of

desperation—I didn't have any money. Mostly I nicked whatever I needed. I used to steal books and cassettes. The raft was one thing I didn't need. That was more of a thrill-



seeking event. I stole it from a sporting-goods store. Then I took it to a park and just left it there.

■ **Your mom dated David Bowie. Did you ever have Lucky Charms with Ziggy Stardust?**

MAJOR_DON, ORANGE, NJ
In my mind's eye, that question has a lot of different connotations, but I think Major Don is being honest, and he's wondering if I ever shared bread with David. Yeah, we did. I was probably around 9, and this was the Thin White Duke period, right when "Fame" and "Young Americans" came out and then into the next period after

SLASH: TIERNEY GEARON. GROOMING: CHERI KEATING AT THE WALL GROUP. OPPOSITE: BOWIE: TERRY O'NEILL/CETTY IMAGES; GUNS N' ROSES: MARK WEISS (2).

that. He was deep in the middle of strangeness and getting weirder and weirder all the time.

► **Have you seen Steven Adler on *Celebrity Rehab With Dr. Drew*? Did he really call you to bitch about not getting to play drums in Velvet Revolver?**

KIM.EDWARDS, TORONTO
I avoid watching *Celebrity Rehab* because I was talking to Steven on a regular basis when they were filming that. But he did freak out on me for doing a solo record and not inviting him to play on it. Whenever he was fucked up, that topic would always come up. He's still recovering, and I was thinking about asking him to play on a track or two if he puts his shit together.

► **Was there ever a woman you wanted and couldn't get?**

ILLUSIONIST6, LEXINGTON, TX
There was one girl I wanted who finally invited me to her parents' apartment and turned me on to the Aerosmith *Rocks* record. I ended up listening to her records and forgot all about her.

► **Dude, I'm thinking of getting a snake. What's a good starter snake?**

J. SEHRING, DAYTON, OH
Colubrid snakes are usually good: garter snakes, king snakes, rat snakes, gopher

snakes, the like. I got rid of all my snakes when Perla was in her last trimester—it's just trouble waiting to happen, with a little boy. But when I was a bachelor, the whole house was just snake cages. All my snakes were 10 to 20 feet long, and I had about 80 of them.

► **What do you recall about the last conversation you had with Axl Rose?**

DANNYBOY, FAIRFIELD, CT
Oh, it was a long time ago, and I don't think it was really worth remembering. I don't remember what it was about—I think it was all sorts of business stuff.

► **I heard that on Velvet Revolver tours, Scott Weiland had to have a separate dressing room all to himself. Was life on the road with him just a pain in the ass?**

AGODLEY, GREENVILLE, SC
He did have his own dressing room, but a lot of lead singers seem to be into that whole thing. He didn't participate in pretty much anything. Since it was a new band, separate dressing rooms was a little alienating.

► **I sing great, but I don't have a drug problem. Can I still audition for Velvet Revolver?**

SOUC.MCGOWAN, KENNESAW, GA
Hah, that's a good question. I don't have a problem with drugs, I just have a

problem with people who abuse drugs and can't handle their own responsibilities. So if you have a drug problem and you can function, that's fine.

► **Chinese Democracy—worth the wait?**

PRX871, SANTIAGO, CHILE
A DJ I was doing an interview with played part of the single over the phone. Sounded good to me. Leave it at that.

► **You have a heart defibrillator in your chest that gives you a shock when you get too excited. When's the last time it went off?**

APP4DSTRXN, ARLINGTON, MA
The doctors put that in when I almost died from alcohol poisoning in 2001. They told me I had six weeks to live. But it wasn't adjusted for when I perform live. So I went out and did a couple of Michael Jackson shows and the thing was going off—my adrenaline was taking my heart rate over the limit they'd programmed into the defibrillator. It was like getting hit in the chest with a baseball bat from the inside out.

► **You worked at Tower Records. Did you have any other menial jobs?**

Worst uniform you ever had to wear? BARISTASARA, LAKE CHARLES, LA
I worked in a music store, at a newsstand, all kinds of stupid shit. I was an usher at a theater where we had Sunday matinees for convalescents. Anytime you had to wear slacks with a white shirt and a tie, it was fucked.

► **What's crazier: Guns N' Roses touring without you, or Led Zeppelin touring without Robert Plant?**

TELEGRAM.SAM, WARWICK, RI
Well, it's nice to be mentioned in the same sentence as Led Zeppelin. You know, Guns N' Roses have been doing it without me for a while.

► **Lars Ulrich told *Blender* that when Metallica toured with Guns N' Roses, he was at some parties that could be described as orgies. Where did you fit in to that scenario?**

PETER.KUNTZ, NEW YORK
I was the fifth guy on the left.

► **Which drug do you miss the most?**

FRAGROKR, LLOYDMINSTER, ALBERTA, CANADA
I don't sit around dwelling on it. But like any junkie with any loyalty, I would say the really great days of heroin were very memorable. It was a special time. Of course, it all goes to shit eventually. ☹



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WAR OF THE ROSES

ONE THING HASN'T CHANGED SINCE THE DAYS GUNS N' ROSES RULED THE PLANET: EVERYONE IS STILL HAUNTED BY **AXL ROSE**. INCLUDING AXL HIMSELF



WE ALL HAVE OUR TWISTED GNR obsessions, and mine is "Breakdown." It's my favorite song on *Use Your Illusion II*, one I've never heard on the radio (according to iTunes, it's their 76th most popular track), but it sums up everything that terrifies me about Axl Rose. He whistles over a banjo prelude, he growls over gospel-boogie piano, he

wails about Nietzschean existential despair ("I've come to know the cold/I think of it as home") while he fries his esophagus like a bacon strip. Axl usually stays away from car songs, but he ends this one barreling down the highway in an Axl-pocalyptic trance, chanting the crazed radio-DJ monologue from *Vanishing Point*, the ultimate '70s stoner road movie. He's never sounded so lost and wounded, but he doesn't care, because he's free. He's the DJ, urging on the speed-freak fugitive, but he's also the lone driver! The soul hero in his soul mobile! Nice work, Axl. Hey, mind dropping me here? Nah, I'll walk.

So much has changed since the days when Axl ruled the planet. Steven Adler? On the new season of *Celebrity Rehab*. Michelle? Probably a couple of grand-kids by now. The dog Izzy cuddles in the "Sweet Child O' Mine" video? R.I.P. But Axl is still Axl, getting under our skins with that classic Greek-tragedy combo

of sympathy and terror. Everyone would love to trade places with Slash for a day, but nobody wants to be Axl—he's so powerful because he convinces us that he lives in his own psychic hell, and none of us are safe from turning into him. To this day, I am constitutionally incapable of using my credit card at the liquor store, because that would mean I'm *on the night train*, ready to crash and burn, never to return, and that song scares the bejeezus out of me.

But not as much as the fact that *Chinese Democracy* finally exists. Putting the damn thing out might be the most frightening move Axl has ever made.

Whatever kept him tinkering with these songs for 17 years, it was probably the same thing that kept the world fiending for it—he's haunted by Axl, like the rest of us. He wants to know what happens to the guy in "Breakdown," the guy in "Welcome to the Jungle" and "Patience" and "It's So Easy." So he's »



GOD: BRB!

Axl isn't the only mystery man who knows how to keep true believers in suspense. Some of these comebacks were worth it. Some were no-shows. And some just sucked

JESUS CHRIST

The Son of God will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. But no rush. Bill Hicks joked that Jesus hasn't returned because Christians wear crosses: "You think he wants to see a cross?"

STANLEY KUBRICK

Spent years making *Eyes Wide Shut* in secrecy, with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman putting all other projects aside. Turned out to be a really long *Red Shoe Diaries*. Then he died. As HAL 9000 would say: a case of human error.

JIM MORRISON

Faked his death and escaped to Africa. Any high school stoner can tell you about all the clues he planted in his songs telling groupies where to find him. No one here gets out alive—except the Lizard King! And maybe also Tupac.

TERRENCE MALICK

The *Badlands* auteur struggled for years to complete his WW II epic, *The Thin Red Line*. Cineasts cheered, then asked, "This is a M-A-S-H rerun, right? The one where Hawkeye does mesc and strangles a chicken?" Oh, well.

BRIAN WILSON

The Beach Boys' *Smile* was synonymous with "lost masterpiece" until Brian finished it in 2004. Then it stopped being a depressing legend and became a great pop record. If only more stories ended this way—wouldn't it be nice?

BOB DYLAN

At the peak of his fame in 1966, he supposedly almost got killed in a motorcycle crash—and dropped from sight. While hiding out in Woodstock, he made *The Basement Tapes*; his sick day beat everybody else's work day.

labored over these tunes longer than Miley Cyrus has been alive, and to gripe that none of them are as great as Miley's "See You Again" would be silly even if it's true; there is no way to compare this to any other music, because the good Lord made only one Axl, and this is the only *Chinese Democracy* he will ever make. When you come face to face with the Loch Ness Monster, you do not complain about its breath.

It's like James Joyce taking 17 years to write *Finnegans Wake*, which was also a follow-up nobody thought could live up to the hype. Joyce released excerpts over the years, under the title *Work in Progress*, building anticipation to the point where *Finnegans Wake* inspired a book of critical essays before it even came out. Axl—who has seen this music circulate online for years—can probably relate. Especially since *Finnegans Wake* is roughly as coherent as these songs.

But *Chinese Democracy* is easily the most hotly anticipated album of recorded music ever released, one that has spawned years of rumor and secrecy and speculation, inspiring every jerk in the 310 area code to claim they know some guy with the *real* story on what Axl is up to. He hasn't been a missing person, of course—he has toured, he has surfaced for this soundtrack or that MTV gig. But people crave more than just music from this man. They want action, decision, a sign that he maybe cares. In other words, they want his soul, and despite his "I get up around whenever" work schedule and reclusive personality, he's down

enough with that game to raise the curtain on this album.

It's almost disappointing that there are so many good songs on *Chinese Democracy*. If you were hoping for an end-of-civilization disaster or a dictated-by-alien brain-freak, you lose, because for the most part these are perfectly nice piano ballads, with nobody in the studio to say, "No, actually, 600 of these overdubs would be plenty." Some of them could have used a few more years of work, but I think "Better" was probably as good as it was going to get after 17 years, which by a curious coincidence is how long it takes to sit through "Street of Dreams."

It sounds like Axl got tired of waiting for technology to evolve to the point where he could hook up the electrodes and patch his cerebellum straight into the computer, until he finally gave up and said, *fine, use all the tapes*. So practically every moment is a pig pile of overdubs that would be impossible to carbon-date. Who the fuck knows how many Dizzys and Jizzys and Bucketpants and Bumblefaces are buried deep in the mix? There's a half-dozen or so guitarists, all doing an admirable job of sounding like Slash (tragically, none of the bassists try to sound like Duff). The tracks are stuffed like Tokyo subway cars, but that's the point, as the production creates a claustrophobic chamber of robot-voice overdubs and celeb psychosis—in other words, it's the album Britney makes once a year, except Britney has nastier lyrics and Axl has the sensitive ballad called "Catcher in the Rye."

All of which begs the big ques-

tion: Why? How come Axl finally decided to let the music come out? Especially at a moment when *out* doesn't mean what it used to, and *coming* means Best Buy shopping carts in a retail environment that makes "Welcome to the Jungle" sound like "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now." Why does the album revive the same songs fans downloaded in 2002? Why did the most long-awaited comeback in music history, the dinosaur rock opus that was supposed to make the world safe for dinosaurs again, open to such piddly sales? It only moved a quarter of a million copies, which means it was thoroughly defeated by an album Kanye West knocked out in his sleep.

Of course, these questions just roll back on us, because Axl is a mirror, a star who thrives on being mind-read yet gives nothing away, forcing us to do all the work. He isn't Axl without us, so the real question is: Why are we all getting excited over a new GNR album? Isn't it a little like a *Herman's Head* reunion episode? Ice-T compared this project to "day-old McDonald's," and he said that six years ago; by now, it's an Arch Deluxe in a time capsule.

But the answer, quite simply, must be something as banal as "because it's there." (Or maybe the even more banal "he needs the money.") Axl's willingness to shoulder the Sisyphean burden of making this unmakeable album is proof that after all these years, he cares. It turns out he's as caught up in the romance of *Chinese Democracy*—he's as caught up in his own Axology—as his biggest fans. **B**

NOTHIN' BUT A GOOD TIME



Rock musicals are, by definition, tedious half-assed creatures. Except when they have dance numbers based on dumb old REO Speedwagon videos. In which case, it's the off-Broadway show *Rock of Ages*, which I expected to love, but turned out to be several dozen times better than I hoped. It's basically a hair-metal *Wedding Singer*, with Constantine Maroulis from *American Idol* as a janitor in an '80s Sunset Strip rock club who falls in love with a girl named Sherrie. Unbelievably, he waits until the second act to bust out "Oh Sherrie." The superb cast finds new crannies of humor and pathos in countless acid-washed oldies; it takes sophisticated Pat Benatar scholarship to dig up "Shadows of the Night." The tequila-guzzling moms in the audience, a few of whom do not have visible SLIPPERY WHEN WET tattoos, are at least 30 percent of the fun. (The Styx fan next to me was seeing it for the third time that week.) Best of all, the show rescues "Don't Stop Believin'" from the hellhole of significance it's been stuck in since the *Sopranos* finale. I hated to seeing this song turned into a classy cultural artifact, but it finally sounds trashy again.

THEIR WORLD
HIS RULES



FALL

OW



BOY

BY JOSH EELLS PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAI REGAN

BABIES! BREAKUPS! BROMANCES!

PETE WENTZ IS A COMPULSIVE ATTENTION SEEKER IN A WAY THAT MAKES HIM A PERFECT ROCK STAR AND COMPLETELY ANNOYING. THAT'S WHY, AS HE WAS GAINING A WIFE AND SON, HE ALMOST LOST HIS BAND

IT'S NOT EVERY DAY YOU GET TO WATCH A ROCK STAR PEE.

Fall Out Boy are in Philadelphia, the second stop on a back-to-basics club tour to promote their new album. They drove down from Boston this morning in a rented Dodge minivan and are currently lounging in the makeshift dressing room of a North Philly dive bar, across the street from Floyd & Diann's Tire Service. A camera crew from Fuse is here, and a gaggle of pubescent girls awaits a meet-and-greet just outside the door. And over in the corner, Pete Wentz is unzipping his pants.

Armed with an empty 16-ounce Poland Spring bottle, Wentz—Fall Out Boy's 29-year-old bassist and mouthpiece—turns to face the wall. While the rest of the room averts their eyes, he hunches his back and takes what is, by all appearances, a brief yet wholly satisfying piss.

"All right," he says, zipping back up. "We ready?"

PATRICK STUMP VOCALS/GUITARS



Pete Wentz has built his life around making the private public. In an age when all reality is televised and the most intimate of details are broadcast via Facebook Alert, Wentz is the king of the overshare—penning songs that flaunt their autobiographical provenance and blogging obsessively about everything from his 2005 suicide attempt to his favorite skate shoes. Unguarded and unashamed, he's the quintessential 21st-century rock star—a penis-flashing Twitter stream come to life.

Wentz has been mocked mercilessly for his attention-mongering. He's been branded an *asshole*, a *sellout*, a *fucktard*, a *fame whore*, a *twat*, a *dick* and a *closeted gay douchebag*—and those are just the comments on one Perez Hilton post. But as Wentz puts it in the single Fall Out Boy will encore with tonight: *I don't care what you think, as long as it's about me.*

"Being famous is like being in the WWF," Wentz says. "When we first came out, I was Hulk Hogan. Kids loved me. Now I'm more like the Undertaker. The thing people don't understand is, the boos are the same as the cheers to me. I just love to wrestle."

"AAAAAND, ACTION ON THE CAROUSEL!"

Two days later—sunny Los Angeles. Fall Out Boy are shooting a video for their new single "America's Suitehearts" at a hangar-sized soundstage. The set resembles a ghoulish Hollywood carnival, complete with zombie starlets, a moat of toxic sludge and a giant red merry-go-round where the band will perform before a pack of bloodthirsty paparazzi.

The cameras roll, and the carousel begins to spin. As the fake photographers swarm, the members of Fall Out Boy circle one

ANDY HURLEY DRUMS



by one into view. First comes guitarist Joe Trohman—crazy-haired and slightly dazed-looking, in red suede boots and a matching fez. The photographers' flashbulbs go *pop*. Next, Andy Hurley, the bearded, tattooed drummer, in a leprechaun-green tuxedo jacket and no shirt. *Pop pop*. Singer Patrick Stump, wearing a canary-yellow tailcoat and a feathered top hat, looking like a debonair chicken. *Pop pop pop*. And finally—in knee-high leather boots, gold lamé hot pants and a black lace headpiece so ghastly Cher could have worn it to the Oscars, and once did—comes Wentz, looking like some kind of gay glam gladiator, an evil-skeleton smile plastered on his face in black and white greasepaint. *Poppoppoppop*.

It's not hard to find reasons to make fun of Wentz. His swooping bangs and disproportionately large head make him look disturbingly like a grown-up version of a Garbage Pail Kid. He wears girls' jeans and toils in a genre known more for its interest in cosmetics than for its contributions to the pop-music canon. His lyrics are more self-indulgent than a luxury-spa retreat. Pictures of his penis have wound up on the Internet. He plays the bass—and not very well.

Yet this self-described "dirty, shitty boy" is also, improbably, the world's biggest rock star under the age of 30. (Try naming one bigger.) He has his hand in a clothing line, an MTV show, a chain of bars and his own record label. Riding the cresting twin waves of emo and MySpace, Fall Out Boy transformed themselves from four Midwestern kids with funny names and bad haircuts to one of rock's last reliable record-movers, selling a combined 4 million copies of their last two albums. And today,

over in the band's dressing room, curled up on a checkered sofa, sits another keystone of Wentz's growing celebrity: a very pregnant Ashlee Simpson-Wentz. She and Wentz were married last May; they're expecting their first child, a boy, literally any minute. "Hey, babe," Wentz says during a break in shooting. He bends down and kisses her cheek. "Feeling OK?"

Simpson wipes a smudge of Wentz's makeup off her face. "I hope he comes out soon," she says, lifting her shirt to expose her colossal belly. "He's killing my bladder."

America's Funniest Home Videos is on, and Wentz plops down on the floor to watch. He scoots backward between Simpson's legs, resting his chin on her thigh and his head gently against her stomach. She strokes his hair, brushing the bangs from his eyes. On the TV, a fat lady tumbles off a trampoline and into a fence. They both laugh.

Wentz allows that the pregnancy sped things up, but he always knew they'd be married someday. He courted Simpson publicly and relentlessly, babbling about his crush in magazines (both were dating other people) and e-mailing her often. "I hunted her down and shot the dart in her," he says. "I just had to wait for her to collapse." Now they live in a Beverly Hills mansion just up the road from Posh and Becks, with his-and-hers bulldogs and a son on the way. "Basically," Wentz says, "I'm married to the person I'd be jerking off to."

The band's new album is called *Folie à Deux*, French for a madness of two—a psychological condition in which two people suffer from similar delusions, each feeding off the other's psychosis. (Wentz read about it in *Newsweek*.) The textbook

JOE TROHMAN GUITARS



PETE WENTZ BASS/LYRICS



example is Romeo and Juliet, but Wentz swears the title isn't about him and Simpson. Instead it's about fame—the toxic symbiosis between stars and their public.

Wentz has always lived his life in the spotlight, mostly by design. But since he married pop's most notorious little sis, he's become a red-hot tabloid magnet, hounded by paparazzi outside Starbucks like any Hollywood celebutard. "Pete would never be on the cover of *People* if it weren't for Ashlee," Perez Hilton says. "Before her, he was just that guy in the band who wore eyeliner and spent a lot of time on his hair." As Ashlee's due date nears, the paps have staked out the couple's home 24/7, hoping to score pics of the mommy-to-be en route to the hospital. The morning after the video shoot, I meet Wentz and Stump for breakfast at The Beverly Hills Hotel. Wentz arrives a half-hour late: The paps pounced before he'd pulled out of the driveway, and he spent the next 30 minutes zigzagging his black Range Rover through the Hollywood Hills trying to lose them. "It's weird," he says, sliding into the booth. "Spending your life being followed by people who want a picture of the person sitting next to you."

Stump snorts: "Welcome to my world."

Wentz likes eating here because the paparazzi can't get in. Still, he sits with his back to the wall, his eyes darting nervously toward any peripheral movement. "I'm paranoid pretty much all the time," he says. A few nights ago, he was in the kitchen when he saw someone on the security monitor: a man, scaling the fence. He ran outside; the intruder hopped in his car and sped off, smashing the Range Rover on the way.

Wentz sets his sunglasses on the table and picks up the menu. Truth be told, he doesn't look great. Dark bags ring his eyes, and his skin has a waxy, jaundiced pallor. He says he sleeps three hours a night—sometimes less—and pops Ambien like Tropical Skittles. "I can take three Xanax bars and not feel a thing," he says. "It's kind of scary."

We haven't been seated long when who should walk in the restaurant but Wentz's buddy John Mayer. "Oh, shit!" Wentz says, jumping up to give him a hug. "What's up, dude?"

Mayer answers with a hearty clap on the back. "I just sent you an e-mail! How's the 32-month pregnancy?" He turns to Stump. "I swear to God, they're making a superhero over there."

Close friends who—had things turned out differently with Jessica Simpson—might also have been brothers-in-law, Wentz and Mayer set online tongues wagging last spring when they engaged in a breathless bromance on their respective blogs. (Wentz praised Mayer in a post called YES, IT'S A CRUSH; two days later, Mayer responded with a gushing note titled CRUSH REQUEST ACCEPTED.) "Pete has this fabulous meta-awareness," Mayer says. "Some people mistake it for narcissism, but it's really just his way of playing with the idea of 'Pete Wentz.' His genius is he's always one step ahead." Mayer also admires the way Wentz has navigated the perils of tabloid romance: "To have this beautiful relationship with someone who gets attacked so often, and to handle it with such grace and respect—I just find that really impressive."

While the two pals catch up, Patrick Stump sits in silence, awkwardly picking at his huevos rancheros. Though he's ostensibly Fall Out Boy's frontman, Stump inevitably takes a backseat to Wentz both onstage and in real life. Partly it's good for business: Their well-known division of labor (Pete writes the lyrics, Patrick the melodies) keeps Wentz's antics front and center, while Stump is largely a blank slate—a golden-throated delivery system for someone else's emotions, the plain white cracker to Wentz's cheese. But it's also a function of personality. A self-described nerd, Stump says he has "terribly low self-esteem" and shuns the spotlight whenever possible. And

though he's a gifted producer who's been invited to make beats for superstars like Lil Wayne and Jay-Z, he always finds a way to say no. "I'm just a fat white dude from Glenview, Illinois," he says. "As a hip-hop fan, I don't want me doing hip-hop."

According to Wentz, Stump "has this amazing ability to hide in plain sight." Sometimes, though, it's unclear whether he's hiding or just not being seen. Take the night of the presidential election, when both were in New York. Wentz attended a birthday party for Diddy, where he cheered the returns alongside Jay-Z, Ben Stiller and Kenneth from *30 Rock*. Stump, meanwhile, watched CNN alone in his hotel room. "Dude, you should have called me!" Wentz says when he hears this news. But it's clear from Stump's face that it wouldn't have mattered.

Still, the two are about as close as friends as can be. Stump was the best man at Wentz's wedding, as well as the one who "talked him off the cliff" when the penis photos hit the Web. ("Things literally could not have gotten worse," Wentz says now. "I was just a wingman for my cock.")

Often, however, the pair's folie à deux doesn't leave much room for numbers *trois* and *quatre*. The first time I meet Andy Hurley, in his dressing room at the video shoot, he's feeling suicidal. "If the Packers don't get this first down I'm going to kill myself," says the drummer, watching his beloved Packers struggle against the Vikings. When Green Bay's kicker misses the game-winning field goal, Hurley slams his iPhone onto the table, gets up and, without a word, starts punching the metal door frame, and doesn't stop for 45 seconds.

Let's face it: The dude's a little weird. A self-described "anarcho-savagist," Hurley believes that civilization is on its way out, and the sooner the better—he opposes conservation,

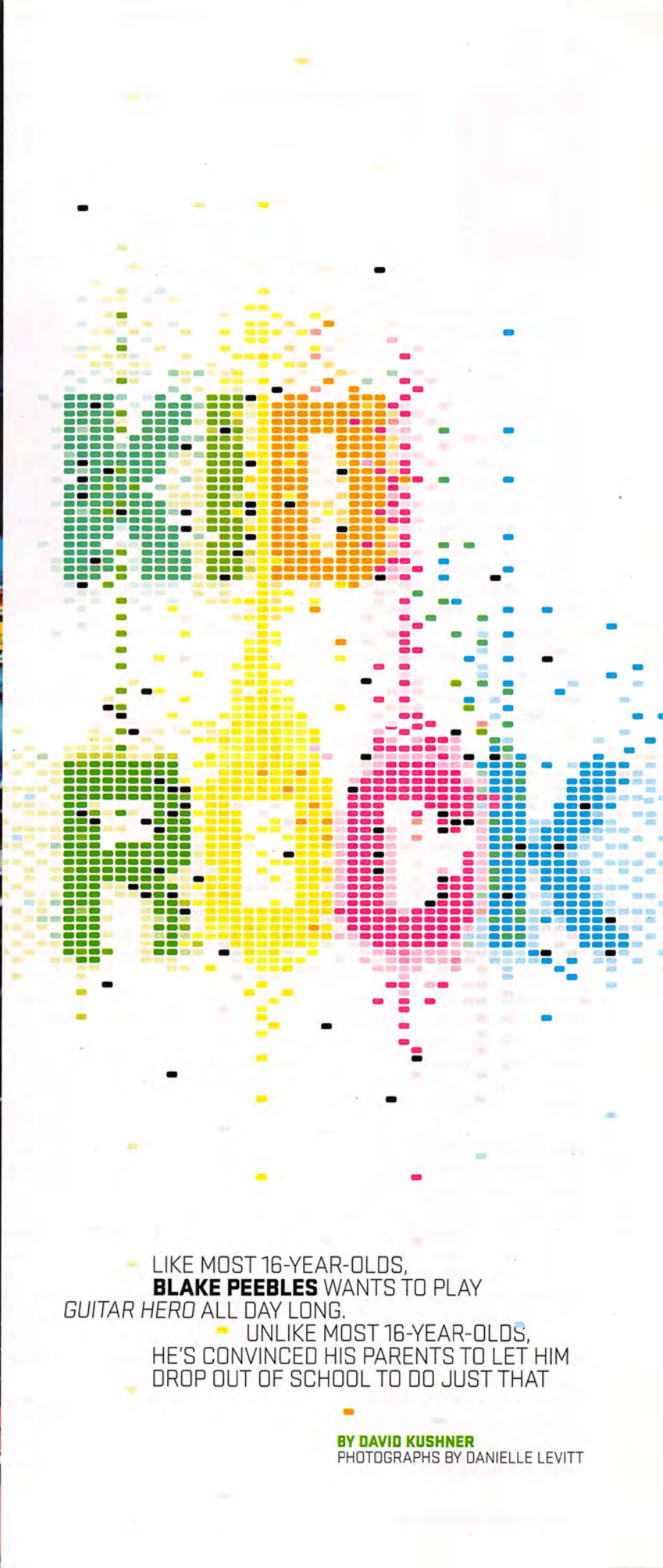


WENTZ TRAINS FOR THAT LITTLE-KNOWN OLYMPIC EVENT, BIGMOUTH-BASSIST HIGH JUMP.

[illegible]

BLAKE PEEBLES: "BOW
DOWN BEFORE MY MIGHTY BABY-
BLUE GAME PERIPHERAL!"





■ LIKE MOST 16-YEAR-OLDS,
BLAKE PEEBLES WANTS TO PLAY
GUITAR HERO ALL DAY LONG.

■ UNLIKE MOST 16-YEAR-OLDS,
HE'S CONVINCED HIS PARENTS TO LET HIM
DROP OUT OF SCHOOL TO DO JUST THAT

■
BY DAVID KUSHNER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIELLE LEVITT

BLAKE PEEBLES FLOPS ONTO HIS BED IN HIS ROYAL-BLUE BEDROOM AT 2 A.M., AS HIS RAVEN-HAIRED MOM, HUNTER, COMES TO HIS DOOR. "CAN I DIM THE LIGHT FOR YOU, HONEY?" SHE ASKS WITH A WARM SMILE.

BLAKE, A SKINNY 16-YEAR-OLD with shaggy brown hair and translucent braces, is barefoot in baggy shorts and an over-large red T-shirt. Words bubble slowly from the side of his mouth like comic-book speech balloons. "Yeah," he mumbles, as his mom darkens the room. But she's not putting him night-night. She's helping him to better see the video game he's playing: *Guitar Hero III*.

With a stone-cold stare, Blake selects the game's most feared track, U.K. shredders DragonForce's "Through the Fire and Flames," a speed-metal explosion known reverently among gamers only by its acronym: "TTFAP." Over the next eight minutes, a ridiculous 3,772 notes whiz by in a bone-crushing, finger-fucking downpour of Skittle-colored pain. Clutching his plastic guitar, Blake answers each spray of falling discs with lightning-fast taps of the matching multicolored buttons. As his left hand spider-strikes the rainbow keys, his right deftly double-flicks the strum bar. Most players would be ecstatic just to finish "TTFAP." Blake scores 750,000—and several times he wasn't even looking at the screen.

Blake is a professional *Guitar Hero* player. He has dedicated his life to the franchise, which has become a pop-culture phenomenon and raked in more than \$1 billion in North American retail sales since debuting in late 2005. Tonight he is practicing for a *Guitar Hero III* tournament being held 10 hours from now in his hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina.

Training is a family affair in this well-appointed suburban home. Tucker—Blake's crew-cut 18-year-old jock brother, best friend and coach—is sparring with him. Though Blake is soft-spoken, his ego is palpable as he tosses a wry post-"TTFAP" glance at his brother. After Tucker screws up his own game, he moans, "God, I hate it when I do that!" "And I love it!" Blake cracks. The boys' stocky dad, Mike, a successful real-estate developer and local basketball coach, strides into the room with a black playbook tucked under his arm. The binder is stuffed with Star Power charts—intricate graphs detailing game strategy—downloaded from the Internet.

As the presence of the playbook indicates, Blake is dead serious about *Guitar Hero*. Last year, in a development the envy of teenage nerds everywhere, he dropped out of his private Christian school to stay home and thoroughly master the game—with his parents' blessing. "We know this isn't the traditional path," Mike says. "But one life doesn't fit all."

BLAKE SPENDS MOST OF HIS TIME alone in his bedroom, which has been transformed into a gamer's gym. There are a half dozen consoles and a jumble of plastic guitars. His bed is set on the floor at optimal TV-viewing height.

Typically, Blake awakes at noon, checks Facebook, nibbles on a Pop-Tart, then warms up with a couple hours of game play. His parents hired a home-schooling tutor but, after deeming it too pricey, enrolled Blake in an online high school called The MorningStar Academy instead. Blake spends three hours a day clicking through classwork and IMing teachers, then he's back to the Xbox 360 for another 10 hours. He still plays the occasional shooter like *Gears of War 2* but devotes most of his time to *Guitar Hero*. He usually puts down his ax at around 5 A.M., just as his dad is getting up for work.

His dedication is paying off. Though *Guitar Hero* has no unified ranking system, Blake is considered one of the best



"GAH! THE SUN! IT BURNS!" BLAKE WITH (FROM LEFT) MOM HUNTER, SISTER CARAMY, BROTHER TUCKER AND DAD MIKE.

players in the world. Online, he has held top-five spots in each of *Guitar Hero III*'s most difficult songs, and he has finished first in all but two tournaments. In October, he beat out 5,000 players to land a Top 10 debut at the national finals of the World Cyber Games, which WCG exec Aaron Smolick describes as the "Olympics" of video games.

Smolick sees the sport growing into something like pro skateboarding. But he admits these are still the Dogtown years of cybersports. "It's a hobby, and only a handful of pro guys make six figures," he says. "Players shouldn't drop out of school to do this, but that's up to them."

Right now, success on the *Guitar Hero* circuit is measured in bragging rights, not cash. In 2008, Blake won about \$2,500, a dozen game systems and a year's supply of Chick-fil-A sandwiches. "It's still way more than he'd ever make mowing lawns," defends his dad. Mike eagerly shows off a PowerPoint presentation that he and Blake have prepared. The first slide, titled "Blake Peebles Promotions: *Guitar Hero* Phenom," includes a wistful photo of Blake posing in a T-shirt with the slogan *THE VACATION NEVER ENDS*. The plan is built around parlaying Blake's unlikely fame into the more lucrative first-person-shooter circuit of games such as *Halo 2* and *Counter-Strike*. One player, Johnathan Wendel, better known as Fatality, has earned more than \$500,000 in this scene.

Movie producers are interested in Blake's story, and talk shows and potential sponsors are calling. A soda company wanted Blake to endorse its beverage, but backed out after learning he has diabetes. "We told them it's only Type 1 diabetes," recalls his dad, bitterly. "Blake can have sugar!"

WHILE BLAKE'S MASTERY OF THE PLASTIC ax is notable, it pales in comparison to one of the most amazing feats in all of teenage history: convincing your parents to let you drop out of school to stay home and play video games.

Blake felt out of place growing up in Tar Heel country, where boys are expected to play sports—the more the better. On top of that, life at home was tough. His 13-year-old sister was born with Kabuki syndrome, a rare condition that leaves her mentally and physically challenged. She's prone to seizures, and at one point, Blake's dad donated a kidney to keep her alive. With two working parents and his sister's constant need for care, Blake and Tucker were often left to another guardian. "The video game was like a babysitter for them," Mike says, casting down his eyes.

Video games had Blake at *Halo*. "I was better than anyone right away," he says. "And I realized I loved doing this." He and his pals started holding all-night game sessions every Saturday, and Blake came to life with the camaraderie. He even scored a girlfriend, thanks to his increased confidence.

Blake didn't care much about movies or TV. All he wanted to do was game. By eighth grade, he began getting into trouble at school, partly because he was going unchallenged. Blake, who tested three grades ahead of his class, would finish math work quickly and spend the rest of class cracking fart jokes with his friends. His grades slipped. Detentions followed.

But his own health issues soon made him take his life more seriously. At 14, he was diagnosed with diabetes; he now walks around with a tube sticking in his stomach that feeds him insulin from a small device in his pocket. That same year, on Halloween, he stepped out of the bushes to cross the street when a car hit him head-on at 50 mph. When told he is lucky to have survived, he's typically deadpan: "It wasn't luck; it was skill."

Stuck at home recuperating, Blake honed his skills at *Halo 2*, becoming a formidable killer online. He took a nickname, Dremine, after his two favorite hip-hop artists. When he got his paws on *Guitar Hero II*, he found he had an even greater natural talent. "I got to expert level in one hour," Blake says.

Guitar Hero turned him on to rock. He discovered Guns N' Roses and Red Hot Chili Peppers, and saw his first concert, by former GNR axman Buckethead, after becoming a fan through *GH*. "Oh, my God, it was, like, crazy!" he gushes. "You see his fingers up close in real life and they're moving so fast and so precise. Everything he does sounds perfect!"

Blake began playing the competition at the equivalent of neighborhood b-ball courts: local game-store tourneys. Soon, he told his parents, "School's a waste of time. I want to be a professional gamer."

"Yeah, you and every other kid," his dad replied. But after sufficient nagging, his parents reconsidered. Hunter had always dreamed of being a dancer, and proved her doubting father wrong by opening her own studio, which she runs to this day. As a basketball coach, Mike prided himself on encouraging his players. "Here I am telling these other kids to go and find your passion," Mike recalls. "But I'm not listening to my own son, just because his passion isn't mine." So Mike told Blake, "Show me your game plan."

Blake hit the Web with an academic fervor, reading up on pro-gaming leagues,

the industry, the sponsorships, the future. He typed up a business plan, tallying potential tournament prize money and highlighting successful players like Fatal1ty. His parents wanted Blake to have a fallback vocation, like video-game development, but let their son have a shot at it. "Most people think we're insane," admits Mike, who has sparred with message-boards critics calling the Peebleses everything from "losers" to "assholes." "The online stuff was rough," Mike says. "I went back and forth with people for a while, but Blake doesn't care what people think. He was always the levelheaded one."

"**BLAKE, COME DOWNSTAIRS, WE GOTTA ROLL,**" calls Mike from the kitchen the morning of the tourney. Blake, who was up until 3 A.M. practicing, ambles downstairs clutching his signature baby-blue ax. He hits the road on only Pop-Tarts and insulin.

As Blake strides confidently into the Play N Trade store in a nearby strip mall, it's clear his reputation precedes him. The crowd—a couple dozen people, mainly teens, mostly dudes—immediately takes notice. Blake smiles slyly.

"Oh, shit, if he's playing, I'm out of here," mutters one kid. Blake offers an apologetic shrug. "Hello, shatterer of my dreams," cracks Blake's local rival, Richard "D!ck" Dingee, a doughy 23-year-old corrections officer wearing a tuxedo T-shirt, a pentagram necklace and an Avenged Sevenfold cap.

The previous month, as his competitors know, Blake stunned *Guitar Hero* elders by besting 21-year-old favorite Michael "Priest" Holmes at the WCG USA National Final tournament in Los Angeles. "Blake seems pretty composed, so he doesn't make many mistakes," says Holmes. "And he's only 16. That kid's going to be one of the best players ever." In the end, Blake finished in the top 10; he was knocked out of the competition by a 20-year-old student named Thomas "Witwix" Burke, who went on to take home the grand prize of \$3,000, a digital camera and a trip to Germany.

Today, Blake takes out Dingee in the first round, then offs three other slack-jawed victims. In the finals, the ref calls out "TTFAP," and the audience actually gasps. Blake will win this one easily, taking home the new *Guitar Hero World Tour*. The consolation prize is a chocolate-chip cookie. Before the face-off, Blake's opponent, lanky 26-year-old Andres "Shinobi" Colon, jokes, "Can I have my cookie now?" When "TTFAP" unleashes its flurry of discs, Colon fumbles and the score meter quickly swings in Blake's direction.

Earlier, Blake confided that life as a star gamer isn't always what it's cracked up to be: "It stops being fun anymore, and it starts to get boring." Plus, he misses the social life at school, and having a girlfriend—she broke up with him for playing too much *Guitar Hero*. He hints that he might go back for senior year, so he can have one last shot at a normal kid's life.

But he's not a normal kid anymore. He's a guitar hero for real. And, like any pro, he knows when to put on a show. With the crowd of geeks fawning over him, Blake takes his eyes off the game mid-song. Fingers blurring over his guitar, he stares up at the ceiling as the candy-colored discs rain down onscreen. And he doesn't miss a note. **B**



PLAY FOR PAY!

Lack the hand-eye coordination to be a professional video-game player? Then let *Blender* be your guidance counselor! Here are four other ways to turn a hobby into a job
BY JON COPLON

SLEEP-RESEARCH SUBJECT

Stand to earn: \$3,000 for a 16-day study
Benefit: Getting to sleep on a bed rather than a futon with stains you don't recall making
Potential downside: Research assistants forget to wake you; dust mites devour your snoring body

SPERM DONOR

Stand to earn: \$100 per deposit
Benefit: A different selection of magazines
Potential downside: Repetitive-strain injury

COMPETITIVE EATER

Stand to earn: \$10,000 for first place in Nathan's annual hot-dog-eating contest
Benefit: Every visit to T.G.I. Friday's is tax-deductible
Potential downside: See the last half hour of *Super Size Me*

MUSIC JOURNALIST

Stand to earn: \$1 a word and up
Benefits: Free concert tickets, free CDs, license to inflict your opinions on others under the umbrella of "expertise"
Potential downside: Having to write "clever" sidebars

ABOVE: COMPETITIVE EATER JOEY CHESNUT. **RIGHT:** WOODY ALLEN, WORLD'S MOST NEBBISHY SPERM.





BLENDER'S RECESSION-PROOF PICKS
FOR YOUR MUSIC AND MOVIE DOLLARS IN
THE COMING YEAR



CRUSH
KITTENS
OF
THE
YEAR

nina sky

► AFTER A FIVE-YEAR WAIT,

IDENTICAL TWINS DELIVER AN R&B HAPPY ENDING

THE MUSICAL
(MARCH)
ALBUM NO. 2

► 2004 WAS THE FIRST TIME we heard from Nina Sky. But 2004 was also the last time we heard from Nina Sky. Queens, New York-bred twins Natalie and Nicole Albino disappeared so quickly, so mysteriously, not even the cast of *Law & Order* would bother to investigate. It was a familiar enough path they followed. First: Storm the charts, the clubs and Honda Civic stereo systems with your out-of-nowhere breakthrough banger (in their case, the crackling, serpentine, No. 4 hit "Move Ya Body"). Second: Disappear. Third: Leave people unable to tell the difference between you and Lumidee. Nina Sky just circled the merry-go-round faster than anyone else.

But the sisters, now 22, are back this spring with their second album, *The Musical*. They say the five-year wait—a hiatus brought about by label squabbling only recently rectified—has made them more ambitious than ever. "If you wanna have fun, we have fun songs," says Nicole (the Ni in Nina). "If you're hating a dude, we have hate-the-dude songs. If you're feeling lovey-dovey, we have romantic songs." Natalie (the Na in Nina), agrees: "It's an every-emotion album!"

From the breathy come-ons and sensual thudding of "Curtain Call"—the lead single featuring rapper Rick Ross—to the breakup slam "Chapter's Closed" to the Ryan Leslie-produced swoon "The Real," it's a hard-thwacking set, heavy on drums even at its most tender. "No matter what we're talking about," Nicole says, "we want people to move to it." JONAH WEINER

Natalie and Nicole Albino:
"Hurry up! Apollonia needs
her wardrobe back by 3."

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK SQUIRES

The-Dream and Tricky test out their new line of hi-fi arm rests.



THE
CHART
RULERS

TRICKY and THE-DREAM

► THESE BEAT GURUS WHO'VE

MINISTERED TO RIHANNA, BEYONCÉ AND MARIAH ARE READY TO GET THEIR OWN SHINE ON

LOVE VS. MONEY (TBD)
ALBUM NO. 2

► **THE-DREAM—ONE HALF OF** pop's most inventive, reliable and successful hit-making duo—is in a Manhattan recording studio, splitting the difference between a Chad Johnson touchdown dance and *When Harry Met Sally's* fake-orgasm scene. He pumps at the soundproofed ceiling, does a little two-step in his lizard-print high-tops, throws back his head and squeals: "Mmmm! Oohhh! Yeeeah!" Dream's job is to live vicariously—he writes songs for pop superstars, in which he imagines their longings, loves and booty calls—but right now, he's savoring news that one star he has helped is going to help him. "I sent Mariah this beat for my album," he explains. "Prayed she'd get on it. Got the

call the other day: 'Mariah loves it!'" Cue some more end-zone moans. "I was like, *Oooh, baby, yesss!*"

Across the room, Christopher "Tricky" Stewart, hunches over a laptop, paying no attention to his songwriting partner. They first collaborated in 2003, two of the seven people behind Britney and Madonna's "Me Against the Music"; the duo has enjoyed an astonishing run. Rihanna's "Umbrella." Mariah's "Touch My Body." Mary J. Blige's "Just Fine." Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)." They excel at mixing weird digitalia—synths that groan, drone, zap and melt—with nagging, nimble melodies; their sonics owe a debt to Timbaland and their tunes nod to R. Kelly, but these

days, Tricky and The-Dream have a better hit rate than either and a \$110,000-per-track fee to show for it.

Tricky is the introvert who speaks in a nerdy-sweet Midwestern drawl and has a little trouble with eye contact. He began session drumming in Chicago at age 8 (his mother was a backup singer for Curtis Mayfield and Aretha Franklin), and he loves the prog virtuosity of the Mars Volta. In all, he seems most comfortable in the company of a MacBook. The-Dream—born Terius Nash—is the frontman. He walks in with a stunning Lisa Bonet look-alike on his arm and a silk scarf careening jauntily off his neck. He worships Prince and James Brown, and he speaks, it seems, in a

nonstop Chris Rock impression—high-pitched, sonorous, profane. At one point, he greets his studio engineer by playfully threatening to hit him "with a dick jab."

Their personalities are distinct, but their creative roles are blurred. Tricky's domain is production; The-Dream focuses on the lyrics and the sex appeal. "Dream'll be like, 'I don't give a fuck why you think that chord progression should be there,'" Tricky explains. "'Drop that shit and put in an 808! That's what a DJ's gonna wanna play three times in a row.'"

This year is about some me-time. Tricky is plotting his own dancey "beat record" full of guests, but before that comes The-Dream's second solo album, *Love Vs. Money*. Working on Dream material, the duo enjoys a certain freedom: Chart expectations aren't anywhere near Beyoncé-high. "I don't wanna jump off the deep end," Dream says. "But maybe consumers are a little deeper than we give them credit for." The album's dominant mode is throbbing, state-of-the-art R&B lasciviousness and strobing electronics—its stranger moments suggest Prince as coproduced by Trent Reznor and Thom Yorke. "I'm the crash-test dummy: Strap this idea on me, and when it works, we'll dial it up for someone more established," Dream says. "Anyone can have a No. 1. Our goal is to move the needle." JONAH WEINER

RELEASES

MEGA-STARS

Pearl Jam

Title TBD (sometime this year)

Album no. 9

Their last album *Condemned*

Bush, was grungy—surprise!

Pearl Jam will be taking road-tested new tunes into the studio with longtime producer Brendan O'Brien, but first up is a superdeluxe reissue of their flannel-tastic debut, *Ten*.

Among the bonus tracks are the ultimate grunge karaoke tapes: the vocal-free demos Eddie Vedder sang over to win his job.

NO DOUBT

Title TBD (winter ... if we're lucky)

Album no. 6

Their last album Came out before Gwen's two kids did

It's been so long since 2001's *Rock Steady*, No Doubt promoted it on *Dawson's Creek*. The band will be writing on the road this summer, drawing inspiration from the crowds at their reunion tour.

U2

Title TBD (spring '09)

Album no. 12

Their last album Went five for five at the Grammys

They spent two albums re-establishing themselves as a kick-ass rock band. Bono promises the new one sounds like the transition between *The Joshua Tree* and *Achtung Baby*—which is good news if you run a Sunglass Hut.



QUEENS OF POP

Christina Aguilera

Title TBD (summer '09)

Album no. 4

Her last album Two words: *jazz hands* 2008's remake of "Genie in a Bottle" was a "preview of what's to come," Aguilera says. The new CD will be "much more futuristic," inspired by the bold colors of pop artists Warhol and Lichtenstein, and the street art of Basquiat and Banksy. You read right: Xtina Aguilera, art collector.

LILY ALLEN

It's Not Me, It's You (February 10)

Album no. 2

Her last album Took snark to new heights

"I'm not going to tell you my new album is brilliant. I don't think it is. I don't have any self-confidence," Allen confesses to *Blender*. Nonetheless, this second CD reprises her magnificently snide attitude, with New Order-inspired electronic beats replacing the first album's ska skip. The bouncy kiss-off "Fuck You" was inspired by President George W. Bush, who Allen thinks is "a bigot." She wrote "Everyone's at It" ("it" being drugs) because "the press likes to talk about drugs being an underclass problem, but I see doctors and lawyers who do copious amounts of cocaine every week." And in "It's Not Fair," she scolds an inept lover. Could men learn anything by listening to the song? "Yeah," Allen says. "Use your fingers."

CIARA

Fantasy Ride (early '09)

Album no. 3

Her last album Was light on Goodies

This is CiCi's magnum opus: one disc of quiet-storm ballads, one of dirty-Southern crunk and one of freestyle dance beats. In keeping with federal law, Lil Jon guests.

HIP-HOP KINGS

The Black Eyed Peas

The e.n.d. (early '09)

Album no. 5

Their last album Made stars of Fergie, will.i.am—and, uh, the other two guys sure can breakdance.

Will promises, "Three-minute songs, 10-minute songs, 30-second songs, Webisodes, virals, skits." Haters may hope the title is prophetic.

EMINEM

Relapse (early '09)

Album no. 5

His last album Was full of vomiting sound F/X (we hope they were F/X) Em's Rasta accent on "I'm Having a Relapse" is new. His endorsement of Xanax and butt-banging of mannequins, not so much. Expect more unearthly noises: One of Em's D12 homies says *Relapse* "sounds like it was recorded on Saturn or Pluto."

DR. DRE

Detox (who the hell knows?)

Album no. 3 (and, supposedly, his final)

His last album Came out before the Iraq War—four years before The hip-hop *Chinese Democracy*. Dre's 20-year-old son died in August: Will the greatest rap producer of all time now move past blunts and bitches?





INDIE DARLINGS

M. Ward

Hold Time (February 17)
Album no. 7

His last album A duo with Elf star Zoëe Deschanel under the name She & Him. The former reading teacher is known for his spookily retro acoustic fingerpicking, but here he branches out with glam guitar and strings. Ward calls the hi-lo mix "that accidental sound": "I like the idea that you're not sure in what part of the last century something was recorded." He cites Billie Holiday's 1958 album *Lady in Satin* as inspiration for the lusciously broke-down vibe: "She's at the end of her life. She's not treating herself or her voice very well. And there's a lot to draw from."



JAY REATARD

Watch Me Fall (May 19)

Album no. 4

His last album A CD compiling seven-inch singles only hipsters had. A garage-rock brawler since 15, Reatard recently quit drinking. "I was like, I'm not going to have fun anymore," he says. "But daylight's amazing!" His new album features mandolin and (maturity!) a cello.

WILCO

Title TBD (spring '09)

Album no. 7

Their last album Was so smooth and mellow, it was perfect for VW ads. "One Wing," the new song they played at Lollapalooza last summer, was a prairie-blown guitar-mysticism epic. Opening for Neil Young this winter may further amp up their feedback sprawl.



NEW KIDS

White Lies

To Lose My Life (spring '09)
Album no. 1

Their last album Two singles from the band they formed at 15. These three black-clad British gloom merchants all just turned 21—Echo and the Bunnymen (to whom they're frequently compared) could be their grandparents. "I went to see Echo a few months ago," bassist Charles Cave says. "We're all big fans now." Their music teems with heavy-eyeliner drama, goopy synths and rafter-shaking guitars. It's all very *I Love the 80s*, but are ultra-earnest songs about death and sadness just too moeey? "We save up that kind of pain and put it in songs," Cave says. "But if we felt that way every day, we wouldn't be able to function."

PASSION PIT

Title TBD (May 12)

Album no. 1

Their last album An EP made as a Valentine's Day gift for the singer's girlfriend. At the start of these electro-yelpers' way-catchy "Better Things," there's a vintage sample of front-man Michael Angelakos as a toddler. "I was a maniacal band leader at, like, age 6," he says. Still chasing childlike sounds, he plans to include hand bells and children's choirs on PP's debut: "I want them on every track."

GABRIELLA CILMI

Lessons to Be Learned (March 17)

Album no. 1

Her last album None. This Aussie pop sensation warbles somewhere between Billie Holiday and Debbie Harry and swears allegiance to Robert Plant. She recorded her big-voiced pop record in Wonderland—well, author Lewis Carroll's former mansion, anyway.

MOVIES PREVIEW

FANBOY FLICKS

A LOOK AT FOUR '09 FILMS THE COMIC-BOOK-GUY CROWD CAN'T WAIT TO SEE



WATCHMEN (MARCH 6)

The adventures of a crew of vigilante superheroes, set in an alternate 1985

WHAT'S THE DEAL

Best. Graphic Novel. Ever ... finally comes to the big screen!

WHY HERDS ARE SALIVATING

Watchmen author Alan Moore isn't on board; his vision is bound to get dumbed down.

WHAT THE COUNTERS SAY

Malin Akerman, as the pleather-clad Silk Spectre II

REQUISITE HOT CHICK

Your vintage *Watchmen* smiley-face tee

WHAT TO WEAR OPENING NIGHT



STAR TREK (MAY 8)

A reimagining of the classic, featuring James T. Kirk and the *Enterprise* crew as young 'uns

Um, we are talking about *Star Trek* here.

Director J.J. Abrams wasn't a *Trekker* before accepting the job and he'll destroy the franchise!

Zoë Saldana, as Uhura, strips down in one scene! Hey, it gets warm on the *Enterprise*.

Vulcan ears (don't act like you don't already own a pair)



TRANSFORMERS: REVENGE OF THE FALLEN (JUNE 26)

Sequel to the 2007 blockbuster about warring factions of alien robots

More killer 'bots! More Megan Fox!

Robots don't look enough like the '80s toys; too many stupid humans.

Megan Fox as ... oh, who cares, as long as she wears a belly shirt!

Home-made Optimus Prime costume



FANBOYS (FEBRUARY 6)

It's 1998 and five *Star Wars* fans head to Skywalker Ranch to steal a print of *The Phantom Menace*

"Finally, a movie about our people!"

Multiple release delays and extensive reshoots don't bode well.

Kristen Bell—in a Princess Leia slave outfit!

Chewbacca mask and your inhaler necklace



M. WARD: ERIKA GOLDBERG/RETNA; WHITE LIES: STEVE GULLICK; MOVIES PREVIEW: WATCHMEN: CLAY ENOS; STAR TREK: INDUSTRIAL LIGHT & MAGIC; TRANSFORMERS: PARAMOUNT (2); FANBOYS: THE WEINSTEIN COMPANY; SMILEY FACE: WARNER BROS.; VULCAN HAND: PARAMOUNT/COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION; OPPOSITE PAGE: STYLING: AVENA GALLAGHER FOR DE FACTO INC.; HAIR: KOZMO FOR BRYAN BANTRY; MAKEUP: ANDIE MARKOE BYRNE



Esmée Denters:
Dutch for
Quit staring
at my legs.

► **ESMÉE DENTERS WAS ON HER WAY** to a useful career as a social worker when she chanced upon online celebrity. Two years ago, paying tuition by waiting tables at a pancake house in Holland, Esmée (pronounced *Ez-May*) posted a YouTube video of herself singing the TLC hit "Waterfalls." The clip, shot with her sister's Webcam, is grainy but captivating—Denters nervously chomps her gum—and faster than you can say "LonelyGirl," her shy, Dutch-au-pair-next-door charm had attracted more than 100 million views. Among the smitten voyeurs: Justin Timberlake, who liked her cover of his "What Goes Around ... Comes Around" and made her the first artist signed to his label, Tennman Records. Also a fan: Oprah Winfrey, who featured Denters alongside a skateboarding bulldog on her show about YouTube phenoms.

Her debut album will be far less low-tech than her MySpace videos. She's worked with OneRepublic's Ryan Tedder (who created Leona Lewis' "Bleeding Love") and the production duo Stargate (Beyoncé's "Irreplaceable"), who, she says, are "amazing. I've been singing their songs since I started on YouTube." Timberlake is executive producing, and he adds vocals to the electro-bounce jam "Love Dealer," in which the usually demure Denters warns, "Don't let these innocent eyes fool you."

At 20, she still lives with her mom in the small Dutch village of Oosterbeek and continues to post covers on YouTube, though they're less pixilated now. "I have to pinch myself to make sure this is really happening," she says. "I hope it'll never stop, because I was a terrible waitress." JON COPLON

THE
POP
PROTÉGÉE

ESMÉE DENTERS

► PANCAKE WAITRESS CATCHES JUSTIN

TIMBERLAKE'S EYE. BEAUTIFUL MUSIC ENSUES

TBD
(MARCH)
ALBUM NO. 1

The Ladies' Man

NEEDS TO GET HIS SEX ON!

SO, FOR THE 15-DATE ONE-NIGHT-STAND TOUR

HE MADE A RULE: **LADIES ONLY.**

BLENDER TOOK THE TEMPERATURE OF THE CROWD

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROXANNE LOWIT

You don't want to know what she did with this poster board later.



Usher's

THE WOMEN OF ONE-NIGHT STAND



JESSICA
BANK BRANCH MANAGER, 35

"There are some nice ladies looking pretty fly out here tonight. Classy. We're all trying to catch his attention by makin' sure we look cute but not hoochie. I call it 'street but sweet.'"



MARISOL
STYLIST, 36

"On the way here, I hit another car with my convertible. I was flying! My daughter was like, 'Mom you're rushing for nothing.' But I'm like, 'I don't care. I gotta get there!' We're OK, but it was bad."



JODY
ACCESSORY DESIGNER, 39

"I wore this top tonight because cheetah makes me feel glamorous and sexy, like Usher! His routine with the hats and bent-wood chairs was my favorite part of the show. Very Bob Fosse."



MIN
HAIR COLORIST, 33

"I definitely had to look my best tonight. Everyone here seems really young. Maybe he wants a woman with experience, but he pulled someone else up onstage. Usher, I still love you!"



ANGELINA AND JAY
FASHION DESIGNER, STYLIST, 20s

Jay: "Did you see the part of the show where Usher was playing the piano and his dancer was writhing on top of it? Blew my mind! It was like a visual orgasm! I needed a moment after that."



SHANICE
SIGN-LANGUAGE TEACHER, 20s

"Usher loves me already, so he'll love me even more when he sees my outfit. I've been a fan since the very beginning. 'Nice & Slow' is my jam. That song just does it for me."



JESSICA (center)
HAIRDRESSER, 20

"I made this shirt myself. My look is all about meeting Usher. But if I got him alone, he would definitely have to do all the talking, because I would be having a heart attack."



ERIN
STUDENT, 17

"I took a lime here from Long Island with my friends, but the driver wouldn't let us party. I feel like half the people here are moms. If I had five minutes alone with Usher, I would definitely rape him."



JENNIFER AND MARQUITA
MODELS, 25, 18

Marquita: "You gotta sex it up for Usher, because he sexes it up times a thousand for you, so I paid attention to what I'm wearing tonight. But I'm not that easy, so he'd have to work to get me."



ANIKQUA
STUDENT, 22

"My memories of listening to Usher are all X-rated. You know, having tender moments, then 'U Got It Bad' comes on and all of a sudden tender becomes ... even more tender."



NIJA
AAA REPRESENTATIVE, 26

"Usher's married, but I could get him. All he needs to do is look at me. What would we do together? What do you think? My red lips would be all over his body! His wife had better watch out."



THEODORA
STUDENT, 20s

"I'm a big lover, and Usher's a lover boy. He's a good dancer—I don't know if he's a good kisser. We'll see. Usher had ladies' night. Maybe 50 Cent should have guys' night. That would be more rowdy."



IMAN
MODEL-SINGER-ACTRESS, 25

"I relate to the fact that Usher's grown up now. With the election, it's a good time to put forth responsibility and maturity without losing your sex appeal. I mean, Obama's sexy!"



OLIVIA
FASHION PUBLICIST, 22

"I came with my dad. He's a producer. I'm really surprised by the amount of guys here. I thought it was ladies' night! 'Love in This Club' will always be a favorite of mine—it's my time-to-party song."



MONIKA
MARKETING DIRECTOR, 38

"If I had Usher all to myself I would kiss his god-like, bronze, perfect chest. It's my favorite part of his body. DMFG this show was one big mesmerizing nirvana-like seduction. Wow."

LOUNGE ACT

**EVERYTHING
IS BIGGER
IN TEXAS**

Blender brought large-scale entertainment to Austin's hottest rock festival from Friday, September 27 to Sunday, September 29. Just steps away from the action the Music Lounge, presented by Blender, provided a haven for artists and guests to chill, give exclusive interviews to Blender.com, and check out Retro Sport apparel by Reebok.



Nicole Atkins



Electric Touch checking out Skull Candy



Reebok's Erica Crowe with artist



The Black and White Years



Jamie Hince of the Kills



G-Love



Beverages at the Music Lounge

Blender struck just the right notes with indoor and outdoor activities. Inside the air-conditioned lounge, guests enjoyed complimentary cocktails by Divine Vodka, appetizers by Jasper's, and talent gifting by Skull Candy, Blac Label Premium Denim, and Oral Fixation mints. Ice-cold Bustelo Cool iced coffee, Sweet Leaf Tea, and Red Bull quenched everyone's thirst during bocce and croquet matches on the sprawling lawn.

A BMF MEDIA GROUP PRODUCTION

THEY MAKE 'EM
WE REVIEW 'EM**KANYE WEST**

☺ After losing his mom and breaking up with his girlfriend, hip-hop's brashest star checks his famous ego and bums out. Sad: It's the new happy.

★★★★

PG. 62

**CALLE 13**

☺ Just when you thought reggaeton was *muerte*, this brilliant Puerto Rican duo gives it a wickedly hilarious makeover on LP number 3.

★★★★

PG. 62

**DAVID COOK**

☹ He trounced Archuleta by 12 million votes, a margin even Obama would envy. And all that texting led to the *Idol* champ's album of wimpy grunge ballads.

★★

PG. 63

GOSSIP GIRL

POP'S TABLOID PRINCESS GROWS BACK HAIR, SHOWS HER LOVE OF FAME AND HATRED OF FAME BY JON DOLAN

➤ IN 2008, **BRITNEY SPEARS** had a pretty good year. Take a second to ponder the cosmic improbability of that sentence. She didn't shave or crash anything. No infants were dropped. She held statues and thanked God at the VMAs. That driving-without-a-license case? Mistrial! That homunculus paparazzi ex-boyfriend-guy's sex tape? Non-existent! And the only trip she made to the E.R. was when little Jayden James got sick.

The best way to cap these shakily triumphant 12 months would be a shocking comeback disc of return-to-form bright-and-shining nymphet nastiness. But *Circus* is at once a spirited attempt to recover that past and a full-throated disavowal of it. There are porny struts in six-inch heels. There are songs that dream of a man who'd accept Britney if she stepped out in moon boots and a burka. There's Disney disco and emo house, '80s cheese and candy »

BRITNEY SPEARS CIRCUS

★★★ JIVE/ZOMBA

THE GUIDE
NEW RELEASES

SCORE

CLASSIC

5★

GREAT

4★

GOOD

3★

MEDIOCRE

2★

FOUL

1★

and fires off celebrity-culture critiques that suggest her songwriting squad members are all in the same feminist book club.

"Mr. Photographer/I think I'm ready for my close-up," she sings on "Kill the Lights," quoting from the '50s noir classic *Sunset Boulevard*—the best movie ever about the degradations of fame—then adds, "All the flashin'/Try'n a cash in/Hurts my eyes." Has she seen the film? Does she know she's paraphrasing Gloria Swanson? Who cares—it's a wry wrinkle from a woman who loves attention so much she literally went to bed with a paparazzo. A few songs later, on "Mmm Papi," she's riding a silly swinging '60s beat and faking a British-heiress accent to reel in a gentleman whose attributes include his fancy car.

On her last album, *Blackout*, she attacked the tabloid/blog "freak show" while wielding her ambulance-jockey insanity like a bludgeon against media jackals ("I'm as crazy as a mother-fucker!"). *Circus* similarly blurs the line between sauciness and self-actualization.

Here, though, there are moments when her tune techs—including Timbaland protégé Danja, "Since U Been Gone" coauthor Dr. Luke, electronica mood merchant Guy Sigsworth and teen-pop inventor Max Martin—fit her with candy-coated bangers that move beyond freaky tantrums and into Madonna-type provocation. On the electro throbber "Circus," she's the ringleader and main attraction. On the squelching, swinging "Womanizer," she's too quick for a predatory guy. Every song seems to have a shattered-mirror/blurred-image/blacked-out-spotlights metaphor. There's autobiography, too. On the pounding "If U Seek Amy," she wanders a club with a drink in her hand looking for a friend who has left her behind, a possible allusion to the lost months she spent in the tutelage of Paris Hilton. On the gauzy, skittering "Blur," she wakes up hung over, next to a stranger, and swears her profligate self a self-lacerating blue streak.

But as the ex-kitten fights to tame the lion within, old limitations stick in her paw. Her detached, technology-tweaked singing always gave Britney's Lolita act a she's-not-there edge; it made her sound hard-hearted, impervious and mercenary, a Darwinian diva. It's why she didn't seem any more human the more pathetic her life got.

Trying to express her actual feelings, instead of inhabiting a fantasy, she leaves us looking for an authenticity and vulnerability that isn't in her skill set. So the ode to her younger child, "My Baby," where she even plays a few notes of piano, seems more stage-managed and less sincere than anything on ... *Baby One More Time*. Same goes for "Out From Under," a soft-rock ballad about overcoming the past that could rattle the clouds coming from a feelings-typhoon like Kelly Clarkson, but sounds airy and cool via Britney.

Circus didn't need to do much more than exist to be an achievement. When the Britney era began 10 years ago, she was the embodiment of a totally different America. Everything was booming, and she was a speculative bubble unto herself, a prime hunk of Florida real estate everyone wanted a piece of. Then she burst. Now she's doing her best to wrestle her Depression to a draw, just like millions of other Americans.

DOWNLOAD "Kill the Lights," "Unusual You"

crunk, a jam about being a mannequin and a piano ballad about being a mom. She revels in bubbly self-trivialization



Britney proves she doesn't need a shaved head to look like a man.

Tales From the Studio

Producer Danja on the making of *Circus*

Where did the magic happen?

I created the tracks at Chalice Recording Studios in Los Angeles—two are on the album and a couple are probably going to be bonus tracks on the Japanese version—then we brought Britney in to record at Glenwood Place Studios in Burbank. On a scale of 1 to 10, how difficult was this record?

Zero. We spent almost a year working on the last album, so we're familiar with each other. Britney just hops in the booth, listens to the song for five or ten minutes and starts dancing if she likes the music. Then she'll just say, "I'm ready."

Album you unabashedly ripped off?
A Hans Zimmer score—say, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, one of those superdramatic movies.

Studio demands include ...

I need to have the Incredible Lagoon—Marcella "Ms. Lago" Araica—my engineer who's with me for every project. Britney's simple, too—she doesn't demand anything special.

The money spent recording this album could buy ...

A really, really nice house and a couple of Maybachs. But if I had the money, I would just invest it. You gotta spend money wisely these days.

Casualties during production?

No, but my engineer's dog Sugar ran away for about four or five hours. It caused massive pandemonium in L.A. We had to shut down production for a day, and Keri Hilson went on the radio to get word out to help find the dog.

All-star guests?

Just Britney Spears. That's enough.

JOHN COPLIN

AKON

FREEDOM

UPFRONT/KONVICT/SRC/UNIVERSAL MOTOWN

★★★

Bulletproof Senegalese hook-o-matic gets sad, rusts up

Over two albums and countless guest hooks, Akon has done his best to replicate genuine human feelings—unbridled lust on "Smack That," gangsta menace on "Soul Survivor," chick-flick love on "Don't Matter." But there's something robotically blank about him. Even when he sang, "I wanna fuck you," he sounded about as hot and bothered as an operating system. On album three, he tests out heartbreak, and his emotional wiring doesn't cooperate. "Poor me" doesn't suit the guy—he's invincible! He tosses fans like basketballs! "I was wrong for fallin' in love," he laments on "Against the Grain," a cautionary tale about stripper romance. The song might have succeeded in the hands of his friend, unabashed goof T-Pain, but Akon's stern anti-ho stance is a bummer. Meanwhile, the malaise is juxtaposed with Europop beats possibly pilfered from an *As Seen on TV* comp. Will somebody please replace this man's batteries?

RYAN DOMBAL

DOWNLOAD "We Don't Care"

THE ALL-AMERICAN REJECTS
WHEN THE WORLD COMES DOWN

★★★

DOGHOUSE/INTERSCOPE/DGC

Rock lightweights pen cheerful songs for the dumped

"When he's inside you, no, there's no room for me," moans All-American Rejects frontman Tyson Ritter on "Damn Girl," flaunting both his sad-sack loverboy pathos and his defiant refusal to experiment in the bedroom. For those who find the Foo Fighters too screamy (fair enough), this Oklahoma pop-punk quartet vacillates cheerfully between ex-girlfriend kiss-off anthems (the final chorus of "Gives You Hell" is shouted en masse by a large fraternity's worth of jovially jilted bros) and acoustic campfire jams specifically designed to ensnare future ex-girlfriends—"Mona Lisa (When the World Comes Down)" might as well be titled "Hey There, Fans of 'Hey There Delilah.'" Anything involving a string section is disastrous, but a

Beyoncé, impervious to arrow attacks from the Persian army.



couple of choruses are suitable for both raucous fist-pumping and rampant pouting. Dude, we never liked her anyway.

ROB HARVILLA
DOWNLOAD "Breakin'"

ANIMAL COLLECTIVE MERRIWEATHER POST PAVILION

★★★★
DOMINO

Hermetic NYC droners venture out into the sunshine

Animal Collective are a polarizing band—they go out of their way to avoid "normal" rock arrangements, and their emphasis on mystique (via fanciful stage names) and webs of texture means they are often annoying as all fuck. They're not exactly focused on making sense, and although they liberally sweeten their eighth album with pinched, reverbed Beach Boys harmonies, only a few intelligible phrases pop out of their mantra-like chants: "Four walls and adobe slats for my girls" or "I want to walk around with you." Still, this is their sunniest, most likeable record, leavened by hints of light-footed dance music: "Summertime Clothes" is guitarless glam-rock, and the samba beat of "Brothersport" keeps careening into a rave-siren loop. And what seem at first like abstract, sparkly electronic cascades and distant twangs and thumps resolve into actual tunes. For once they sound like they're playing around rather than experimenting.

DOUGLAS WOLK
DOWNLOAD "My Girls," "Summertime Clothes"

BEYONCÉ

I AM ... SASHA FIERCE

★★★★

MUSIC WORLD/COLUMBIA

Her alter ego's name suggests a Russian émigrée with a knack for interior decorating—if only it were that exciting

Beyoncé—like Garth Brooks and David Bowie before her—has built an album around a personality split. First we hear from the "real" Beyoncé Knowles; then we hear from Sasha, the façade that shields B from fame's glare. We've only ever known her booty-

licious suit of armor, she's saying, so the promise is revelation. What's revealed is... well, what we're used to. Beyoncé is still a beauty-shop feminist, quick with the smack-downs, and she still describes the rattling rush of love with preternatural

poise. "If I Were a Boy" is a marvel of slow-cooked ham, a wistful role-swapping experiment that might come in handy if she and Jay-Z need marital counseling. And marriage is a subtext throughout: On "Single Ladies," she wields her wedding ring like a brass knuckle, walloping exes too foolish to wife her way back when. Beyond these highlights, there are many moments where she seems less brash newlywed than thrill-is-gone veteran: "Video Phone" overreaches for soft-core-porno edginess, and her take on "Ave Maria" is a cornball, popera devotional—all vow, no wow.

JONAH WEINER
DOWNLOAD "Single Ladies," "That's Why You're Beautiful"

ASTONISHING FACT! Brian Weitz, aka Geologist of ANIMAL COLLECTIVE, has an environmental-policy background. In 2004, he worked for the Senate Subcommittee on Oceans and Fisheries.

Gun Control

AXL ROSE RELEASES 17 YEARS OF ANGER, PARANOIA AND GUITAR SOLOS BY JON DOLAN

GUNS N' ROSES CHINESE DEMOCRACY ★★★★★ GEFEN

LET'S GET SOME PERSPECTIVE. Guns N' Roses spent more time completing the follow-up to 1991's *Use Your Illusion I* and *II* than the United States spent fighting the Vietnam War. The amount of poor decision-making: not dissimilar. There have been feuds, lawsuits, firings and rehiring. All the original Gunners are long gone. Except, of course, the cornrowed supervillain who scared them off.

Chinese Democracy's nonexistence is so ingrained, the source of so many jokes, that its actual existence can only be a letdown. That is, until you hear it. Then, somewhat astonishingly, 6,205 days, at least \$13 million, 14 studios and 20 or so musicians (including five guitarists and a harpist) seems just about right. Axl has written an epic poem to his own obsessive-compulsive disorder. "If I thought that I was crazy/Well I guess I'd have more fun," he sings on "Catcher in the Rye," a blast of IMAX Lynyrd Skynyrd complete with string section, a couple *na na na* refrains, several bridges to nowhere and Lord knows how many latticed layers of Axl's bandanna-banshee singing.

These aren't songs, they're suites—hard-rock hydras cut with miasmic industrial grind, stadium-rattling metal solos, electronic drift and hip-hop churn. Some of it is ludicrous: The symphonic basher "Madagascar" samples bits from *Cool Hand Luke*, *Braveheart*, *Seven* and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Some of it is brilliant: "I.R.S." swaggers and slugs like classic late-'80s GNR. If we had a dime for every time Axl told one of his producers, "This needs just a little more guitar," we could buy everyone on Earth a lifetime supply of General Tso's chicken. But beneath the mountains of sounds, you get a lonely man locating his pain and resentment.

When Guns N' Roses debuted with 1987's epochal *Appetite for Destruction*, Axl was an Indiana hayseed reborn as a snake-dancing messiah. His portraits of the Sunset Strip had an outsider's disdain and desire. Twenty years later, the disdain is still there, but the only world he seems to know is his own Michael Jacksonian isolation: the world of this record and all the strife that marked its creation. Axl's perfectly turned "you"s have a venomous, adolescent contempt; his "they"s drip scattershot paranoia.

You can't blame a man for his feelings, but it's hard to understand them. In an era when everyone else is constantly marketing their lives—twittering, posing for camera phones, putting as much of themselves into the world as possible—Axl has been able to do what he wants, away from everyone, on his own time. A lot of people would look at that as freedom. So how come he talks like he's been in jail?

DOWNLOAD "Catcher in the Rye," "I.R.S."



Axl: "And on guitar, some guy I met this morning at Jamba Juice."

Good Grief

RAP'S IRREPRESSIBLE LOUDMOUTH CATCHES A MIGHTY CASE OF THE BLUES BY JOSH EELLS

KANYE WEST 808s & HEARTBREAK ★★★★★ RDC-A/FELLA/DEF JAM

IN THE PAST 14 MONTHS, Kanye West has buried his mother and split from his girlfriend of more than six years. Those twin misfortunes would have been a heavy blow to any man; for someone as insecure as West, they could have been downright crippling. Kanye is the sensitive man's MC; more than anyone else in rap, he's spent his career grappling with contradiction—money versus art, desires versus expectations. But here he's discovered something worse than feeling conflicted: not feeling anything at all.

As a producer and a performer, West's greatest trick is turning dusty old R&B samples into exuberant summer jams. *808s & Heartbreak*, though, is a chunk of emotional permafrost—a beautiful soundtrack for a long, harsh winter. "Welcome to Heartbreak" is so icy and desolate it should come with a pair of snowshoes, and "Street Lights"—a wistful piano ballad about not looking back—runs sleek but cold, like a Ferrari with the defroster on. It's stunning stuff, and very un-hip-hop: Kanye's raps have given way to a worn-out, digitized croon, and even his trademark wisecracks ("My friend showed me pictures of his kids/And all I could show him was pictures of my cribs") have wilted from brags into laments. His world-class ego is nowhere in sight. You know the saying about hiding your light under a bushel? Kanye hides his inside a locked steel crate, then buries it in a bunker deep within Bummer Mountain.

Sometimes a man soured on humanity will seek solace in technology, and Kanye has two new toys. The first is a Roland TR-808, the prehistoric drum machine that gives the album its name. The 808 features just 16 sounds, but Kanye works wonders with this limited palette, turning lo-fi kick drums into an austere artistic statement. Toy No. 2 is Auto-Tune, the robotic vocal effect made famous by T-Pain. But where T-Pain uses it to give his hooks a superhuman boost, Kanye's flat, nearly unmelodic singing underscores his own cyborgish detachment. He's found a way to turn numbness into art.

DOWNLOAD "Amazing," "RoboCop," "Street Lights"

Q: Why does Kanye love to win? A: Because he hates ties!



ANDREW BIRD NOBLE BEAST

★★★★

FAT POSSUM

Whistling Midwestern
savant figures out the causes
of world decay

In concert, Andrew Bird concocts much of his chamber exotica by looping his violin and guitar lines, then nudging them with urbane vocals so they subdivide and spawn. The process holds ego at a remove, which is a mixed blessing: Bird's virtuosity and cleverness never go prima donna nova, but his personality remains cloudy. Many of the songs on his new album consider the problem of suppressed emotions, and how it can create "harmless sociopaths." Some songs are all middle, stuck on what might be mere bridges by, say, Rufus Wainwright or Paul Simon. Yet Bird's open-field poetics do let a wider world creep in, from the corruption of ecosystems to the isolation that can afflict a touring musician or a declining leader alike. This beast takes care and feeding, but its purring tongue has hints to drop about our changing times.

CARL WILSON

DOWNLOAD "Oh No," "Effigy"

BRANDY HUMAN

★★★★

EPIC

On album five, R&B
princess flees tragedy and finds
her circa-1998 self

On Brandy's last disc, 2004's *Afrodisiac*, the former teen-R&B/teen-sitcom star worked with Kanye West and Timbaland and declared herself "a passionate woman." The transition to adulthood hasn't been easy: In 2006, she was involved in a freeway collision that resulted in one death, a \$50 million lawsuit and leaving behind her plum judgeship on *America's Got Talent*. Now she's gone back to girlie hip-hop Eden; four songs were written by Rodney Jerkins, author of her best late-'90s hits. Fluttery jams about long distance longing and time-suspending slow dances are balanced by grown-up moments of deeply felt, if slightly weird, balladic fortitude ("I'm a train that's moving, and every day I'm picking up speed," yikes!). Her wispily aspirational singing tugs hardest on "Fall," cowritten with Natasha Bedingfield, where escapism and realism do battle and her pretty pony of love rides a beautiful rainbow that may or may not lead to the glue factory of hobbled dreams. Stay tuned.

JON DOLAN

DOWNLOAD "Right Here [Departed]," "Fall"

CALLE 13 LOS DE ATRAS VIENEN CONMIGO

★★★★

SONY BMG

Innovative Puerto Rican
half brothers trash-talk
their fellow Spanglish acts
On this wickedly clever
manifesto, Calle 13 portray
the dons of reggaeton as
crybabies and sex-obsessed
dolts who've been har-
rumpching over the exact
same beat since the craze
erupted in 2004. Lest he be
seen as just another hater, the
duo's fast-talking satirist
Residente (30-year-old René
Pérez Joglar) marches
reggaeton to the high road—
his commentaries about the
harshness of life in Latin
American barrios resemble
those of the great singer
Ruben Blades, one well-
deployed guest here. The
album title translates as *The
Ones Left Behind Are Coming
With Me* and the stated goal
is to "plant a seed in a couple
of hollow heads," but after
a few tracks, you get the sense
that this snapping, highly
addictive amalgam of funk
and folk song, hip-hop and
Old World cumbia will reach
quite a bit further. Consider
reggaeton redefined.

TOM MOON

DOWNLOAD "La Perla," "Que Lloren"



ANE BRUN CHANGING OF THE SEASONS

★★★★

CHEAP LULLABY

Nordic singer examines love and
death under a canopy of strings

Fragility is both Ane Brun's subject and her sound. In her songs, lovers leave and life is fleeting: "I walked into love/I walked into a minefield I never heard of," she sings with a flutter in her voice that's delicate but never coy. Brun was born in Norway and is based in Sweden, but her acoustic-guitar picking and minor-mode tunes are closer to Nick Drake than to ABBA, and just as heartbreaking. She honed her minimalist melancholy on two previous solo albums, and *Changing of the Seasons* is both more death-haunted—"Remember there are a million ways to die," she sings calmly—and an experiment in stealthy pop



"Hey, Rivers, is that a whammy bar in the back of my head, or are you just happy to see me?"

DAVID COOK DAVID COOK

19/RCA

The Battle of Davids behind him, a conquering Idol turns grunge into mush

► Last year's baby-faced *American Idol* winner, like non-winners Bo Bice and Chris Daughtry before him, is the show's idea of a rocker—he even plays guitar. But that doesn't make him rock's idea of a rocker. On Cook's big-label debut, almost every song is a ballad; some are more ballady than others. A few have tasty touches: lush strumming in "Light On," a spacey midsection in "Life on the Moon." But the power-chorded "Bar-Ba-Sol," about a bad night of bloody noses and lost keys, is the only place Cook flexes any muscle. Bryan Adams kicked out more jams; Nickelback let in more humor. As overblown as he is oversensitive, reaching toward the rafters whether his jumbled platitudes about wounded relationships warrant it or not, Cook is more like Michael Bolton in a T-shirt.

CHUCK EDDY
DOWNLOAD "Bar-Ba-Sol"

**GOGOL BORDELLO
SUPER
TARANTULA!**
Sleedonedummy

"They have this whole gypsy vibe mixed with punk rock, and the music makes your blood pump faster. Eugene Hutz is genius. I have a bit of a crush on him."
—Kat Dennings



I LOVE THIS CD!

elaboration. Production by Björk's longtime collaborator Valgeir Sigurðsson paradoxically plays up the transparency of Brun's music, floating ghostly string arrangements and vocal harmonies nearby without ever making her sound less alone, or less mournfully serene.

JON PARELES

DOWNLOAD "The Puzzle," "Lullaby for Grown-ups," "The Treehouse Song"

COMMON UNIVERSAL MIND CONTROL

G.O.O.D./Geffen

He's like that librarian who suddenly takes off her glasses and rips open her blouse

► Common's eighth album sacrifices his professorial reputation at the altar of his libido. The MC turns largely to the Neptunes for music, and their lithe, bombastic space-porno sonatas provide a vitality and playfulness he's still capable of matching. But a string of increasingly awkward and thoroughly ludicrous sex jams finds him slapping asses, and may leave his devotees smacking their foreheads: "Check my dictionary/That ass is so defined" begets "Seen her ass/Crack a smile" begets "I'm gonna touch you where the sun don't shine," the latter on the catastrophic "Sex 4 Sugar," a *Flight of the Conchords* comedy bit played brutally straight. The fiery battle track "Gladiator" and some surprisingly appealing synth-pop dalliances are far less misbegotten—"Everywhere" even indulges his inner Blondie cover band. But beware the hokey "Changes," where our priapic hero compares himself to MLK, Gandhi, Shakespeare, Tupac and Obama, none of whom ever tried to convince you "study abroad" is a hilarious pun.

ROB HARVILLA

DOWNLOAD "Universal Mind Control"

RIVERS CUOMO ALONE II: THE HOME RECORDINGS OF RIVERS CUOMO

★★★★

DGC/INTERSCOPE

Weezer leader mines his living-room demos again, explores the relationship between songwriting and Darjeeling

► Right in the middle of *Alone II*, Rivers Cuomo plants his freak flag: three tunes from *Songs From the Black Hole*, his never-actualized new-wave musical set in the year 2126. No, for real. The trilogy signals a deep strangeness in this tour through his psyche. Fortunately, it has a fairly shredding soundtrack. "I Was Scared" is his signature trudging power-chord pop, less polished but catchier than anything on Weezer's Red Album. "My Brain Is Working Overtime" is a fantastic "Buddy Holly"—like tune Cuomo wrote in 2000 while emerging from his post-*Pinkerton* funk. It gets more interesting when you learn it started as entry No. 92 in his "Catalog o' Riffs," 400-plus-song pieces he's made in a decade by altering his writing habits, sleep patterns and choice of teas. The cover shot of young Rivers sporting a full-on Kajagoogoo mullet is the first drop in the Kentucky Waterfall of weirdness within—19 tracks and 32 pages of liner notes (foot-noted!) that prove dude is even more eccentric than his pervy mustache suggests.

TYLER GRAY

DOWNLOAD "Paper Face," "My Brain Is Working Overtime"

DUCHESS SAYS ALIBI

★★★★

ALIEN8

Montreal quartet reinvents electro punk for the 3,674th time and shows why it's still a good night out

► Fact: You cannot kill the keytar. This most mocked of '80s rock-star accessories (well, does Pamela Anderson count?) continues to live in the fantasies of musicians around the world, where it symbolizes the union of sex, sleaze and dorkitude. Duchess Says may be the ultimate keytar geeks, with a suitably flamboyant singer—Annie-Claude chronicles her search for erotic fulfillment with some of the giddiest orgasmic yowls since Yeah Yeah Yeahs' Karen O. Whether she's squealing in English, French or Klingon (it's hard to tell), she keeps the party moving over the aggro synths of "Black Flag" and "Ccut Up." On this full-length debut, which follows a few ultra-obscure indie singles, Duchess Says break out

with dirty, distortion-heavy club tracks that would make a righteous soundtrack for one of Jenny Humphrey's guerrilla fashion shows on *Gossip Girl*. And Duchess Says pay their respects to the arty wing of '90s indie rock with a surprising, awesome cover of "Rabies (Baby's Got The)," by the Providence, Rhode Island, band Six Finger Satellite. But that's pretty much the only thing these pervers pay any respect at all.

ROB SHEFFIELD

DOWNLOAD "Ccut Up," "Lip Gloss Babyla"

FIRES OF ROME YOU KINGDOM YOU

★★★★

THE HOURS

Sassy New York lads tell tales of women, wine and a monkey

► On "Set in Stone," "My Sharona" drums clomp like a yeti over scruffy bass and build the perfect platform for Andrew Wyatt's swaggering dandy

declaration: "I was disgustingly average as a child, but you can get us through the ropes with your vagina." Can't wait for the video! Snappy taunts are the New York threesome's stock and trade. It works on "Bronx Bombardier," when

Wyatt warns repeatedly, "Don't fuck with me when I'm not sober." And when, in falsetto, he teases, "But you're such a cherry" over and over on the song of the same name, it gives a bluesy track the perfect Lolita-loving pop hook. Their secondary talent is pitting different styles against each other: '70s prog-rock noodling versus white disco; Wyatt's initial Bowie impression in the beginning of "Monkey in a Cage" versus his convincing Geddy Lee high notes moments later when he screeches, "They make you feel just like a monkey in a cage!" Clearly these guys studied some righteous mix tapes in high school.

TYLER GRAY

DOWNLOAD "Set in Stone," "But You're Such a Cherry"

FREE BLOOD THE SINGLES

★★★★

RONG/DFA

Not a Red Cross promotional offer, just two kids making really good dance music

► If this Brooklyn duo's debut were a book, it would be the cult classic *House of Leaves*, where a homeowner goes crazy after discovering the inside of his house is bigger than the outside. Sure, Free Blood look like a puny dance-punk split-level, but they kick out sprawling multilevel jams with the raucous energy of a schoolyard gang. Anchored by the hollow ripple and firework

BLENDER
APPROVED

THE BEST
NEW RELEASES
FROM THE
PAST MONTHS



T-Pain
Thru33 Ringz
NAPPY BOY/
KONVICT/JIVE

Space-age jams to get turned down by girls to, from the RGB Autobot.



Taylor Swift
Fearless
BIG MACHINE
Bad news for this TN whiz-kid's love life, good news for her songs: Boys still suck.



T.I.
Paper Trail
GRAND HUSTLE/
ATLANTIC
He got busted for gun-hoarding. Here, he apologizes ... In a pissed-off sorta way.



Nickelback
Dark Horse
ROADRUNNER
R.I.P. Nickelbashing: This gleefully lug-headed LP is pretty rad. (Cue the Nickelbacklash!)

thunder of bass drums and the manic attack of sticks against everything within reach, the beats have rollicking, primal kinetics that most digital-era grooves lack. There's a heavy dose of label boss James Murphy's hipper-than-thou drawl in Free Blood's voices, but LCD Soundsystem never sounded as dark as "Royal Family," with its braying cellos and kinky monarch phone sex. After 25 minutes, they close with five worthy remixes instead of the typical filler—a startup rarity, knowing how to quit while you're ahead.

ALEX BENENSON

DOWNLOAD "Grumpy," "Royal Family," "Never Hear Surf Music Again"

THE GIRAFFES
PRIME MOTIVATOR

★★★★

CRUSTACEAN

Dirty, sexy, death-defying metal from the free-range ruminants of New York

With five records, one gunshot wound and three heart attacks to their credit, this plucky Brooklyn band has earned its right to party like it's 1983—the year Black Flag, Angry Samoans and other thrashy, proggy, so-called "hardcore bands" roamed the Earth, heedless of genre rules or their own well-being. That hard-living esprit finds a sexy flourish on these 13 tracks (given bong-resinous glow by Queens of the Stone Age producer Dave Catching), as guitarist Damien Paris wends swaggering, '70s-metal come-ons through infectious black comedies ("The Power of Fatherhood," "Allergic to Magnets") whose abiding concerns include ambulances, ICUs and the various routes to same. For a new definition of hardcore, consider the fact that the title song refers to the implanted defibrillator that keeps singer Aaron Lazar alive.

CHRIS NORRIS

DOWNLOAD "Prime Motivator," "Smoke Machine"

GLASVEGAS
GLASVEGAS

★★★★

COLUMBIA

Scottish greasers merge '50s Americana with new millennium sincerity

If you saw Glasvegas walking toward you late at night, you'd cross the street. They dress like streetwise hoods, but the tough exteriors disguise their bleeding hearts. The opening track, "Flowers and Football Tops," was inspired by a true story about a murdered schoolboy, and "Geraldine" is the grimmest, most distorted pop song ever written about a social worker. Frontman and main songwriter James Allan doesn't limit himself to memorializing quiet heroes from the wrong side of the tracks; he's



K'Naan: K'nan't get down off this roof.

willing to get personal. "It's My Own Cheating Heart That Makes Me Cry" is about what a douche he is for playing around on his girlfriend. And "Daddy's Gone," with its elegiac keys and choral harmonies, is the *Field of Dreams* of rock songs, bound to bring tears to the eyes of any dude with father issues. Glasvegas are often compared to the Jesus and Mary Chain, another great Scottish band that worshiped Phil Spector and the whammy pedal, but Mary Chain's appeal was a chilly remoteness. Glasvegas make it cool to care.

ELIZABETH GOODMAN

DOWNLOAD "Geraldine," "Daddy's Gone," "Go Square Go"

THE (INTERNATIONAL) NOISE
CONSPIRACY

THE CROSS OF MY CALLING

★★★★

VAGRANT/AMERICAN

Wordy Swedish quartet passes its second-language requirement like gangbusters

Dennis Lyxzén is a garage-punk veteran who aspires to the strident expressionism of emo's pop side without mustering the muscle of Fall Out Boy's Patrick Stump or Against Me!'s Tom Gabel. Compensating for the shortfall are emotions so brazenly prolix and political they make Gabel's angsty protests sound like an hour alone with his therapist. Mocking the "boredom of safety," name-checking anarchist celebs from the Anabaptists to Up Against the Wall Mother-fucker, Lyxzén and his Rick Rubin-produced henchpeople foment random acts of

revolution or sometimes just destruction—of their own egos in "Assassination of Myself," and of anything they please in "I Am the Dynamite." Generally, they're smart and musical enough to turn rhetorical gestures into convincing rock & roll. But when they subtitle the whole schmear "A Love Vision!" you wonder who they're trying to kid.

ROBERT CHRISTGAU

DOWNLOAD "Assassination of Myself," "Washington Bullets"

K'NAAN
TROUBADOR

★★★★

OCTONE/AGM

An African rapper who has seen enough rough stuff to make 50 Cent look like Hannah Montana

Rappers go on and on about their hard-knock hometowns, but when Kanaana Warsame says his "city code is lock and load," he's repping a hood so tough it requires U.N. military intervention. The 30-year-old MC fled civil-war-ravaged Somalia in his teens (for New York, then Toronto), and he somberly picks through the emotional wreckage

WU-TANG
CLAN
8 DIAGRAMS
SRC/Universal
Motown



"I've liked Wu-Tang since I was a kid, and they've managed to stick around and remain true to their vision. I used to want to be a rapper, but I don't think I look the part." —Robert Pattinson

I LOVE THIS CD!

on his first U.S. release. But he also comes armed with a Bob Marley-like knack for turning strife into sweetness, cheery but rarely dinky singing and rapping, and a self-deprecating wit that revels in his outsidership: He apologizes for the mild knit-cap-and-rap-rock beats by joking that buying Kanye West tracks would've left him with nothing to send the folks back home. And whether he's lamenting immigration hassles or imagining himself a depressed American kid fighting in Iraq, this Muslim fan of Biggie and Bruce Lee has a common touch. He's a universal soldier, not an exotic novelty.

JON DOLAN

DOWNLOAD "Take a Minute," "If Rap Gets Jealous"

LATE OF THE PIER

FANTASY BLACK CHANNEL

★★★★

ASTRALWERKS

Freaked-out English guys turn their ADD into a way to pay the rent

Late of the Pier might want to lay off the Red Bull. These indie-rock/new-wave/glam/electro speed demons graft a club-DJ's mash-up approach onto the four-piece rock band and come up with a debut album that's an exhilarating mess. Singer Samuel Eastgate is like a rock-history Frank Caliendo, nailing impressions of '80s angst android Gary Numan and '70s alienated playboy Bryan Ferry. His mates' best looks include blue-sky ELO harmonies, Bloc Party/Franz Ferdinand four-on-the-floor punk and a dozen flavors of squishy synth scuzz. All this stuff blurs into a rush of short-circuited ideas and desires ("This world is no place for a mind... or a thought," goes a typical Eastgate lyric), as if information overload is their undoing as well as their inspiration. Unable to sort out the past, they're doomed to repeat it—only *waaaay* faster.

JON DOLAN

DOWNLOAD "Broken" "Space and the Woods"

ESAU MWAMWAYA AND RADIOCLIT

ARE THE VERY BEST

★★★★

GHETTOPOP

Meet the world's first Malawian couch salesman turned hipster dance icon

Esau Mwamwaya is from Africa, but his debut mixtape is a child of the jet set. A product of the partnership between this heretofore unknown Malawian singer and the London-based DJ duo that met him at the secondhand furniture store he ran in Hackney, this CD lays Mwamwaya's joyous Chichewan vocal runs over beats snatched from around the globe that offer different visions of African music. On "Kamphopo," he chants over the artsy Afropop of Architecture in Helsinki's "Heart It Races"; elsewhere, the lo-fi synth blurs of South African Kwaito star

Mgarimbe's "Sister Bethina" provide a martial backdrop. The beat choice would be nothing, though, without Mwamwaya's fluorescent tenor and skill for radical interpretations. The melodies he lays over Vampire

Weekend and M.I.A. samples often sound more at home than the originals. It's not world music so much as world-is-flat music.

JONAH WEINER

DOWNLOAD "Kamphopo," "Get It Up," "Cape Cod Kwassa Kwassa"

A.C. NEWMAN

GET GUILTY

★★★★

MATADOR

Canadian power-pop chemist shows his love for the '60s by roughing up the decade

Nostalgia can be deceiving. Carl Newman's spiky, sunny pop songs recall a pretty common set of influences—the Beach Boys, the Kinks—but he's never been a mere imitator. Recording alone or leading the Canadian indie-pop supergroup the New Pornographers to the great *Mass Romantic* and *Electric Version* CDs, he has an eye for the goofy mantra ("Make of that what you will," goes *Get Guilty*'s first thrilling hook) and a love of the gnarled, punchy guitar line that injects restless fun into a genre that is too often insular. "Prophets" soars on a mixing-board perfectionism that is Newman's least obvious but most welcome debt to the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson. Even the weaker material is nothing worse than pleasant, but it outweighs and obscures the better-than-pleasant; the middle of the album dissolves into an anonymously sweet haze.

THEON WEBER

DOWNLOAD "Prophets," "The Collected Works" **B**

The [International] Noise Conspiracy's Inge Johansson ran for city council in Umeå, Sweden, in '04; bandmate Dennis Lyxzén didn't vote for him because Inge wasn't radical enough.

ASTONISHING FACT!

THE SERVICE INDUSTRY

SAUSPOP



CD We Didn't Even Unwrap

BECAUSE WE LOVE YOU:

THE BLENDER MIX

Vol. 7

FREE MUSIC! TEN NEW BANDS THAT WILL ROCK YOUR WORLD AND YOUR MP3 PLAYER

ANJULIE "LOVE SONGS"

This Canuck cooer says she's a sucker for "the cheesy things in life"; we're suckers for her breezy—and, yeah, cheesy—jam about same.

SEBASTIEN GRAINGER "AMERICAN NAMES"

Former Death From Above 1979 drummer gets scuzzy and optimistic, tender and hard-rocking at the same time.

LAND OF TALK "CORNER PHONE"

From Canada's capital of cool (aka Montreal), a fuzzed-out raver for indie kids who still don't have cell phones.

JAPANESE MOTORS "BETTER TRENDS"

Cali guitar fiends offer a jangly vision of meeting cooler friends than the ones you currently have.

THIEVERY CORPORATION "RADIO RETALIATION"

The iriest rudeboys in the District of Columbia return with a chilled-out dub smack-down.

BRETT DENNEN "SAN FRANCISCO"

A gentle redheaded giant who loves herbs and hates shoes croons about the city where everyone feels the same way.

DEAR AND THE HEADLIGHTS "I'M NOT CRYING."

YOU'RE NOT CRYING, ARE YOU?" Revved-up yelp rock from the new rock & roll hot spot: badlands of Arizona (no, really, it's sweltering down there!).

DREW ANDREWS "WIDE AWAKE"

A sweetly strummed acoustic ballad about feeling the world's pain and wanting to offer it a big old musical Advil.

SCHOOL OF SEVEN BELLS "CONJUR"

The guy who used to play guitar in the Secret Machines has a new band with two foxy sisters. The blissed-out atmospherics, though: still intact.

BEN WEAVER "WHITE SNOW"

This gruff Minnesota mountain man has a tender side, too, as evidenced by this bucolic winter meditation.

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SCORE

CLASSIC

5★

GREAT

4★

GOOD

3★

MEDIocre

2★

FOUL

1★

LET'S DANCE

HOW FOUR DEPRESSIVE BRITS BECAME THE WORLD'S FAVORITE CLUB FIENDS BY ROB SHEFFIELD



New Order: "Just think how much more fun this will be when the coke gets here!"

NEW ORDER'S WHOLE career is right there in their 1982 12-inch single "Temptation": disco drums, jittery guitars, synth goop, all building into nine minutes of new-wave tremble and shiver. When these gawky English kids launch into the chorus ("Up, down, turn around/Please don't let me hit the ground"), they sound like they're dancing for the first time in their lives, positive it will end in heartbreak, but brave enough to stick around till dawn just to see what happens. It's a weirdly inspirational sound, and it sums up everything they had to say.

Nobody expected much from the surviving members of Joy Division. When Ian Curtis flamed out in 1980, committing suicide on the eve of the post-punk heroes' first U.S. tour, all he left them was alone. Yet they stuck together, renamed themselves New Order, learned to write songs and accidentally stumbled onto a career as one of the all-time great English pop groups. None of them could sing, so guitarist Bernard Sumner got stuck with the job, and drummer Stephen Morris brought in his girlfriend Gillian Gilbert to play keyboards. Much to their surprise, the electro-goth dance experiments became influential club hits around the world, opening up emotional and musical realms Curtis never could have imagined. Even when Sumner's vocals were laughable—which was almost always—his boyish mumble had the anonymous this-could-be-you realness of the finest disco and punk.

New Order were haphazard about assembling albums—in 1983 they released two classic dance hits, "Blue Monday" and "Confusion," yet failed to put either on their next record. So these superb new deluxe editions are not only definitive, they're essential '80s testaments, adding the singles and B-sides that should have been included all along. The band's gloomy debut,

NEW ORDER
MOVEMENT ★★★★★
POWER, CORRUPTION & LIES ★★★★★
LOW-LIFE ★★★★★
BROTHERHOOD ★★★★★
TECHNIQUE ★★★★★
RHINO

Movement, finally sounds complete now that it has the second disc, collecting the brilliant singles the band knocked out in 1981 and 1982: "Everything's Gone Green," "Ceremony," "Mesh" and especially "Temptation." *Power, Corruption & Lies* was glossier and more grandiose, coasting on the synth-pop epics "Age of Consent" and "Your Silent Face." These records served notice that New Order were more than Joy Division II—they were getting into a totally different groove, figuring out how sequencers and drum machines worked with a "what does this button do?" spirit.

They were also figuring out how human hearts worked, including their own, which is why their next two albums were their best. *Low-Life* goes for vividly romantic club sounds, with a surprisingly playful sense of humor—check out the wacky harmonica solo that opens "Love Vigilantes" or the high-NRG goof "Face Up," which might have the doofiest lyrics of Sumner's career ("I feel so low, I feel so humble/Sometimes in life we take a tumble"—egads!). The eyeliner-melting melodies and elastic Peter Hook basslines reach a climax in "The Perfect Kiss," an ode to late-night dance-floor desperation; Sumner speaks for generations of drunk, lonely club kids when he sighs, "Tonight I should have stayed at home/Playing with my pleasure zone." *Brotherhood* is another step forward, with the band's warmest tunes and zippiest beats. Sumner sounds dazed but passionate, riding the open-hearted surge of "Weirdo," "Broken Promise" and New Order's most famous hit, the eternal floor-filler "Bizarre Love Triangle." (That's the one that goes, "Every time I see you falling/I get down on my knees and pray...") And for giggles, there's the hilariously dreadful B-side "1963," whose emotional impact is roughly akin to Morrissey starring in *Flashdance*.

They bid a graceful farewell with 1989's *Technique*, paying tribute to the Ibiza acid-house club scene they'd made possible. The album has freaky beats ("Fine Time"), sad ballads ("All the Way") and, apparently, wheelbarrows full of drugs. New Order retired into the usual cycle of break-ups, reunions, dodgy side projects and a flukily fantastic 1993 comeback hit ("Regret"), but these albums remain the band's legacy, especially in these editions. Together, they tell a quintessential pop story—how four antisocial twits from Manchester learned, almost against their will, to have fun in public.

DOWNLOAD "Temptation," "Hurt," "Weirdo"



Um... Miles?
That's not what
the trumpet's for.

MILES DAVIS
KIND OF BLUE:
50TH ANNIVERSARY
COLLECTOR'S EDITION

★★★★★

COLUMBIA/LEGACY

**Fifty years on, jazz's
most revered album gets
the superdeluxe treatment**

Kind of Blue is "like the Bible, in a way: You just have one in your house." So sayeth Q-Tip in the documentary DVD that half-justifies this lavish box set (along with some chin-scratching essays and an outtakes CD). But while many a King James Version molders, trumpeter Miles Davis' greatest album begs frequent use, both as an elusive object of worship and a soundtrack for things that tend to happen with the shades drawn. Its ageless cool now seems intertwined with its backstory: Just months after making the album, Davis and most of his sidemen (notably pianist Bill Evans and saxophonists John Coltrane and Julian "Cannonball" Adderley) would spin off in different directions, founding entire schools of jazz. To hear them simmering all together on "So What," even now, is to appreciate the power of the ephemeral. As the good book says, Amen.

NATE CHINEN

DOWNLOAD "So What," "Freddie Freeloader," "Flamenco Sketches"

FRANCO
FRANCOPHONIC

★★★★★

STERNS AFRICA

**A quarter-century
of guitar sorcery from the
James Brown of Africa**

The Congolese guitarist-singer-bandleader Franco Luambo was a blunt-looking, sharp-witted man so firmly rooted in Kinshasa that all the music in Africa's premier music city seemed to revolve around him. The 28 tracks (cherry-picked from nearly 500 recorded between 1953 and 1980) on this flawless two-disc collection begin with a spunky single he cut at 15 and end with a strange 11-minute meditation where he overdubs almost all the parts. In between come rumbas, boleros, band intros, torch songs, threnodies, satires, village echoes, fresh beats, multipartite constructions, billowing guitar workouts, an unforgettable Volkswagen ad and an uncharted array of smooth vocalists and fleet guitarists serving up a sweetness just waiting for his salt. Most have never been available here, much less explained as evocatively as in Ken Braun's liner notes. Listen three times, then read along. Soon you'll notice that you're remembering every tune.

ROBERT CHRISTGAU

DOWNLOAD "AZDA," "Mabele," "Ku Kisanu kikwenda ko"

PAVEMENT

BRIGHTEN THE CORNERS:
NICENE CREEDENCE ED.

★★★★★

MATADOR

**On this 1997 gem, a
famously knotty indie crew
approached something like
accessibility**

By the time they'd recorded their fourth album, slacker gods Pavement had done off-kilter artsiness, fractured improv rock and guitar-shaman freakoutery; now it was time to, like, write some songs. This 1997 set showcases the band at its breeziest and most—*gasp!*—professional, as singer Stephen Malkmus muses slightly less cryptically than usual over loose-limbed guitars and honest-to-goodness hooks. This deluxe edition ups the casual factor a bit, adding a bonus disc of tossed-off B-sides and cheerfully sloppy covers, but it still sounds better crafted than anything they did before or since. Pavement eyed their maturation warily: Newly married guitarist Scott Kannberg contributes ambivalent songs about creeping domesticity ("Date w/ IKEA," "Passat Dream"), and the newly 30 Malkmus sings about weddings and dinner parties like he's watching something circle the drain. Is it youth? Possibility? A band that would break up one album later? If the answer is never clear, it's only because they weren't sure, either.

JOSH EELLS

DOWNLOAD "Stereo," "Blue Hawaiian," "Starlings of the Slipstream"

R.E.M.

MURMUR: DELUXE EDITION

★★★★★

I.R.S./UME

**The mysterious classic
a million frizzy-haired indie
bands ripped off**

Alternative starts here. The 1983 debut that proved smartyboots underground rock could be optimistic classic rock, too, R.E.M.'s *Murmur* was a friendly ghost—brooding but elegant, new-wave moody but folk-rock sunny, hesitant but hopeful. Michael Stipe's mush-mouthed evocations of childhood memories and directionless travel hinted at feelings and

worries he could never pin down, but they melted like butter into guitarist Peter Buck's reassuring chime. (And let's not forget it was college rock: This deluxe edition adds an '83 live show that underscores the U of Georgia campus-kegger scrappiness of songs producer Mitch Easter turned into abstractions.) By now, a generation of bands from Nirvana to Arcade Fire have aimed for the kind of charming, heraldic opacity *Murmur* pioneered. It's a hard target to nail because it's always floating just beyond reach.

JON DOLAN

DOWNLOAD "Radio Free Europe," "Sitting Still," "Laughing"

THE SMITHS

THE SOUND OF THE SMITHS

★★★★★

RHINO

**England's greatest,
weirdest '80s hitmakers get
a 45-song celebration**

The Smiths may be the oddest Greatest Band Ever ever—as English as shepherd's pie, drearier than week-old orphanage porridge, led by a sexually ambiguous meat hater who wore a hearing aid as a fashion accessory. And yet Morrissey and his studio-rat strum-wizard songwriting partner Johnny Marr attained a harmonic confluence of nearly Lennon-McCartney proportions. They've been compiled to death, but this two-disc set (curated by both Morrissey and Marr) is the most comprehensive survey yet of the Mancunians' brief, tear-stained blaze through the mid-'80s indie-pop firmament, during which Marr's tender guitar slickness played perfectly off Moz's morose-goat moan and radiant pseudo-literate poofery. The flakier (and funnier) Morrissey got, the wider Marr cast his net, but his best look remained the kind of forlorn, confectionary jangle over which a contorted young soul might croon, "Call me morbid, call me pale/I spent six years on your trail." And make other young souls weep.

JON DOLAN

DOWNLOAD "Half a Person," "Ask," "There Is a Light That Never Goes Out"

**BLENDER
APPROVED**

THE BEST
REISSUES
FROM
THE
PAST MONTHS



Creedence Clearwater Revival
Cosmo's Factory
FANTASY

From the wildly prolific '60s bayou-hippie wannabes, a hard-chooging, acid-tripping set about the perils of life on tour, and at war.



The Replacements
Tim
SIRE/RHINO

Minneapolis' bards of the bar survived their jump to a major label with this defiant, ramshackle classic—but they wouldn't survive the bar.

SCORE

CLASSIC
5★GREAT
4★GOOD
3★MEDIocre
2★FOUL
1★

DOG DAYS

MICHELLE WILLIAMS EMBODIES MELANCHOLY AND THE INFINITE SADNESS IN A TALE OF A DOWN-ON-HER-LUCK YOUNG WOMAN IN SEARCH OF HER GOLDEN LAB BY DAVID FEAR



Change they can believe in: Wendy (Michelle Williams) and Lucy the dog.

WENDY AND LUCY

★★★★

Directed by

Kelly Reichardt

Starring Michelle

Williams, Will Patton,

John Robinson and

Wally Dalton

DIRECTOR KELLY REICHARDT'S *Wendy and Lucy* is, at first glance, such a textbook example of podunk Amer-indie minimalism that you'd almost think it's a parody: Several scenes consist of nothing but a young woman looking miserable, and the whole thing appears as if it was shot for \$5.98. But this slow-paced,

downbeat view of a life lived on the margins is one of those quiet little films that burrows into your brain and stays there for weeks.

Wendy (Michelle Williams) is a Midwesterner living in her car and making her way to Alaska, where she hopes to get a job at a fish cannery; Lucy is her faithful golden Labrador. A pit stop in Oregon turns into an indefinite stay when her car breaks down, and, after getting busted for shoplifting, Wendy loses her canine companion. Distraught, down on her luck and near broke, Wendy searches everywhere for her MIA best friend.

That's about all there is, plot-wise, to *Wendy and Lucy*, but thanks to Reichardt and Williams, it's more than enough. The director's follow-up to her mournful contemplation on male bonding, *Old Joy* (2006), paints a lo-fi portrait of a shadow America that's usually ignored: It's a landscape of homeless camps, gas-station bathrooms and drugstore parking lots. While Williams has been racking up impressive supporting turns recently, here the actress has to carry the entire movie and make us care about an enigmatic young woman looking for her AWOL pooch. And she pulls it off; the way she communicates a hardscrabble past of hand-to-mouth sur-

vival in one sideways glance is a minor miracle. Never sentimental or sappy, the film uses its girl-loses-pet scenario not to jerk tears, but to offer a glimpse of a life adrift. It's a road movie that stays in one place yet still leaves you feeling like you've been on a long, hard trip.

Reichardt's grungy, downcast film isn't the only new movie that milks a certain '70s vibe of quiet desperation: James Gray's *TWO LOVERS* (★★★) also has more in common with that decade's character-based dramas than with its contemporary

peers. No surprise, given Gray's affinity for the era's gritty crime thrillers (see his movies *The Yards* and *We Own the Night*). But this time, the filmmaker takes a lighter, less violent route. An odd-ball young man (Joaquin Phoenix) has to choose between a reliable, hot brunette (Vinessa Shaw) and the unstable, hot blonde (Gwyneth Paltrow) who lives upstairs. Phoenix plays the romantic misfit with muted quirk, and Paltrow and Shaw's strong work reminds us that they're more than just pretty faces. Still, the movie's lackadaisical attitude toward narrative momentum ends up exhausting your patience. The characters seem to have an infinite amount of tolerance; viewers, however, may not. **B**

"It's not new, but: **The Notebook.** I could barely breathe because by the end I was choking on my own snot and tears. It was so beautiful. Now all potential suitors have to live up to Ryan Gosling."
—Katy Perry

LAST GOOD
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ILLUSTRATION BY AUGUST HEFFNER

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THE FRESH PRINCE

THINK TODAY'S MIDDLE EAST POLITICS ARE COMPLEX? TRY DEALING WITH MEDIEVAL MONSTERS BY LIBE GOAD



PRINCE OF PERSIA
UBISOFT; XBOX 360, PS3, PC
★★★★

▶ LONG BEFORE LARA CROFT, the premier fortune-hunting, fame-seeking video-game hero was the Prince of Persia. Over 20 years and a half-dozen games, this nameless royal climbed, jumped and vaulted through countless adventures. The current prince is a different person than the previous versions' heroes, though he shares their penchant for high-flying acrobatics and perilous sword duels with monsters.

The prince and his sidekick Elika—a hot princess who can fly and zap bad guys with her magic powers—roam wide-open levels, running up walls and pulling off other Jackie Chan-inspired gymnastic feats in between battles with dark gods and their evil minions. We wouldn't say the game is easy, but with Elika around attacking monsters and catching us if we slip from a ledge, it sometimes seems like she's doing all the work.

The game's Middle Eastern brush-painted art style is a bold move away from the photo-realism of modern game making. But the carefully crafted exotic atmosphere is undercut whenever the medieval prince opens his mouth to deliver a piece of dopey dialogue ("So, what's it like being a princess?") in a generic American accent.

EVEN WITH 3-D graphics and a convoluted plot (involving a military/political conspiracy in a near-future dystopia), the basic concept of this update of the '80s arcade/Nintendo classic remains the same: You're a guy with a grappling hook for an arm, which you can use to swing between buildings and over pits. Unfortunately, the swinging controls are unduly difficult, which makes having a grappling hook for an arm slightly less awesome than it ought to be.



BIONIC COMMANDO
CAPCOM; XBOX 360, PS3, PC
★★★★

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: CONQUEST
EA GAMES; XBOX 360, PS3, PC
★★★★



THIS LOTR SPIN-OFF puts you in the shoes (or hairy, oversized bare feet) of Middle Earth's warring denizens. The intense action plays out in the game's impressive combat scenes, in which dozens of characters are hacking and slashing one another onscreen all at once. Players in need of help on the battlefield are able to recruit up to three friends to join them in a campaign. Alternately, 16 people can go head-to-head online in a one-nerd-to-rule-them-all battle royal.

WHAT IF THE Civil War hadn't ended in 1865? *Damnation* presents an intriguing alternative-history scenario in which the North and South are still going at it into the early 1900s and adds a cool steam-punk vibe to the proceedings (there are automaton soldiers and compressed-air-powered guns that shoot railroad spikes). Sadly, the compelling parallel-universe premise proves to be nothing more than the backdrop for a slightly above-average third-person shooter.



DAMNATION
CODEMASTERS; XBOX 360, PS3, PC
★★★★

SKATE 2
EA GAMES; XBOX 360, PS3
★★★★



TONY HAWK MAY dominate the virtual skateboarding world, but the *Skate* franchise has at least one advantage: Its control system, which utilizes the analog sticks, is far more refined than the mindless button mashing in the *Hawk* series. We could do without *Skate 2*'s '80s teen-movie plot about plucky kids sticking it to greedy land developers, but the storyline in a skating game is a lot like that of a porno flick: just something that kills time between all the hardcore grinding.



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PAST MONTHS



Gears of War 2
MICROSOFT; XBOX 360

Forget the Orkin man. This giant-bug invasion requires a very special kind of pest control: a machine gun with a chain-saw bayonet.



Left 4 Dead
EA GAMES; XBOX 360, PC

If the coming zombie apocalypse has a silver lining, it's that we'll learn that teamwork—of the four-player co-op kind—is a virtue.



Soulja Boy Code'em

CYBORG QUARTERBACKS! GUN-TOTING SKYDIVERS! IF THE "CRANK THAT" RAPPER-DANCER HAD HIS WAY, THEY'D BE COMING SOON TO AN XBOX NEAR YOU BY JON COPLON

► If this whole music thing doesn't work out, 18-year-old YouTube sensation Soulja Boy Tell'em has a backup dream career: video-game designer. "I'd want to work for Bungie, Epic or Rockstar," he says. "I could do it." One idea is a *Dance Dance Revolution*-style title, *Crank That: Bust a Move*: "You'd make up a dance and a beat for it. Then you could upload your dance to Xbox Live and let other people try it." Here are three more concepts from the phenom's comically violent mind:

NFL: YOU JUST GOT PWNED

► "I don't even know why people say 'pwned.' After I shoot people in the head in games, other players online be like, 'Soulja Boy, you pwned him!' This is a football game that takes place in the year 6000 A.D. Everybody wears robotic armor, and the ball would be metal. If, say, you're the quarterback running down the field, you could pull out a bazooka and just start shootin' the other players."



TRAPPED IN THE HOOD: NOTHIN' 2 LOSE

► "It's a cross between *The Sims* and *Grand Theft Auto* that's set in Atlanta. Your character would look exactly like you; you'd go through your entire life and every action has a consequence. If you sit in class and you do your schoolwork, you advance to high school and college. But if you stab the teacher in the head with a pencil and kill him, then you get sent to boot camp."



SUPER EXTREME SPORTS

► "There'd be sports where you can get hurt really easily. Like extreme bungee jumping: You'd jump off a super-humongous cliff, and if you don't press the right buttons while you're falling, your legs would snap off and you'd die. In one event, you and your friends would skydive from a helicopter. You're doin' tricks and flips, shooting and fighting people all the way down. That'd be tight."



CHEAP THRILLS

In these recessionary times, you might not be shelling out \$60 to buy quite as many new games as usual. But you can feed yourself and your gaming addiction thanks to these penny-pinching sites
By Libe Goad

► I'M IN LIKE WITH YOU iminlikewithyou.com

Take a break from your soon-to-be-eliminated-anyway job with this collection of free online games, like the *Bejeweled* knockoff *Gemmers*.

► GOOZEX

goozex.com

Build a wish list and trade games with other destitute geeks at this virtual swap meet. Goozex charges a buck a trade.

► THE INDEPENDENT GAMES FESTIVAL igf.com

As with pornography, oftentimes the amateur stuff is better. Get links to the top indie titles out there.

► BIG DOWNLOAD

bigdownload.com

Don't blow your check from the plasma-donation center on bad PC games. Test the demo downloads available here first.

► CHEAP ASS GAMER

cheapassgamer.com

Blogger Cheapy D, the patron saint of miserly gamers, hunts down the best online and real-world bargains.



BLACKBERRY STORM

Your Crackberry addiction just got more crippling

It may sound like an edgy new Ben & Jerry's flavor, but the BlackBerry Storm (\$199 with a two-year contract) is actually a stylish update to the ubiquitous, addictive PDA. It works on Verizon and wears its iPhone influences proudly: a 480 x 360 touchscreen, a 3G EvDO connection, a 3.2-megapixel camera, movie/music playback software and, of course, access to your e-mail and other apps. Unlike the iPhone, the Storm's touchscreen is "clickable"—it feels like you're actually typing when you're answering that "urgent" e-mail from your boss at 3 A.M.

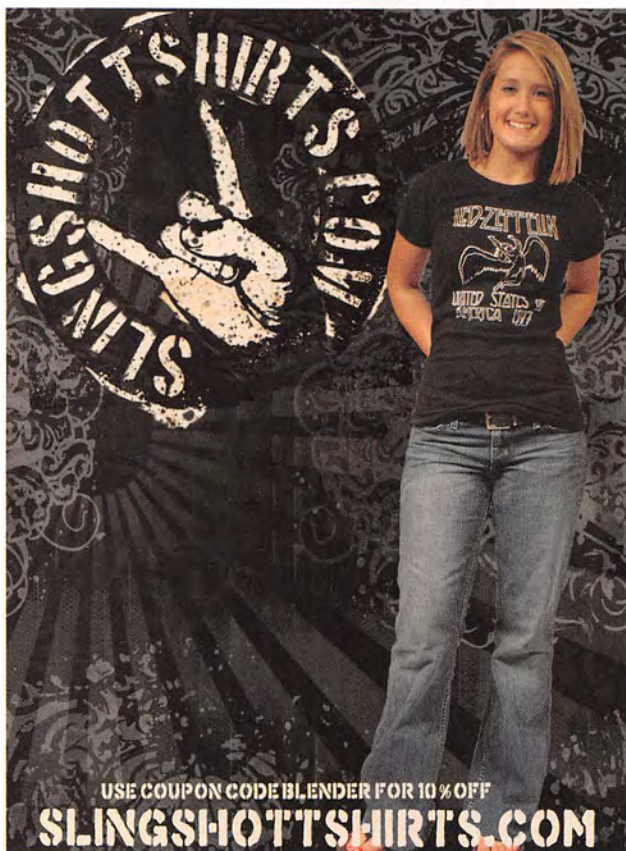


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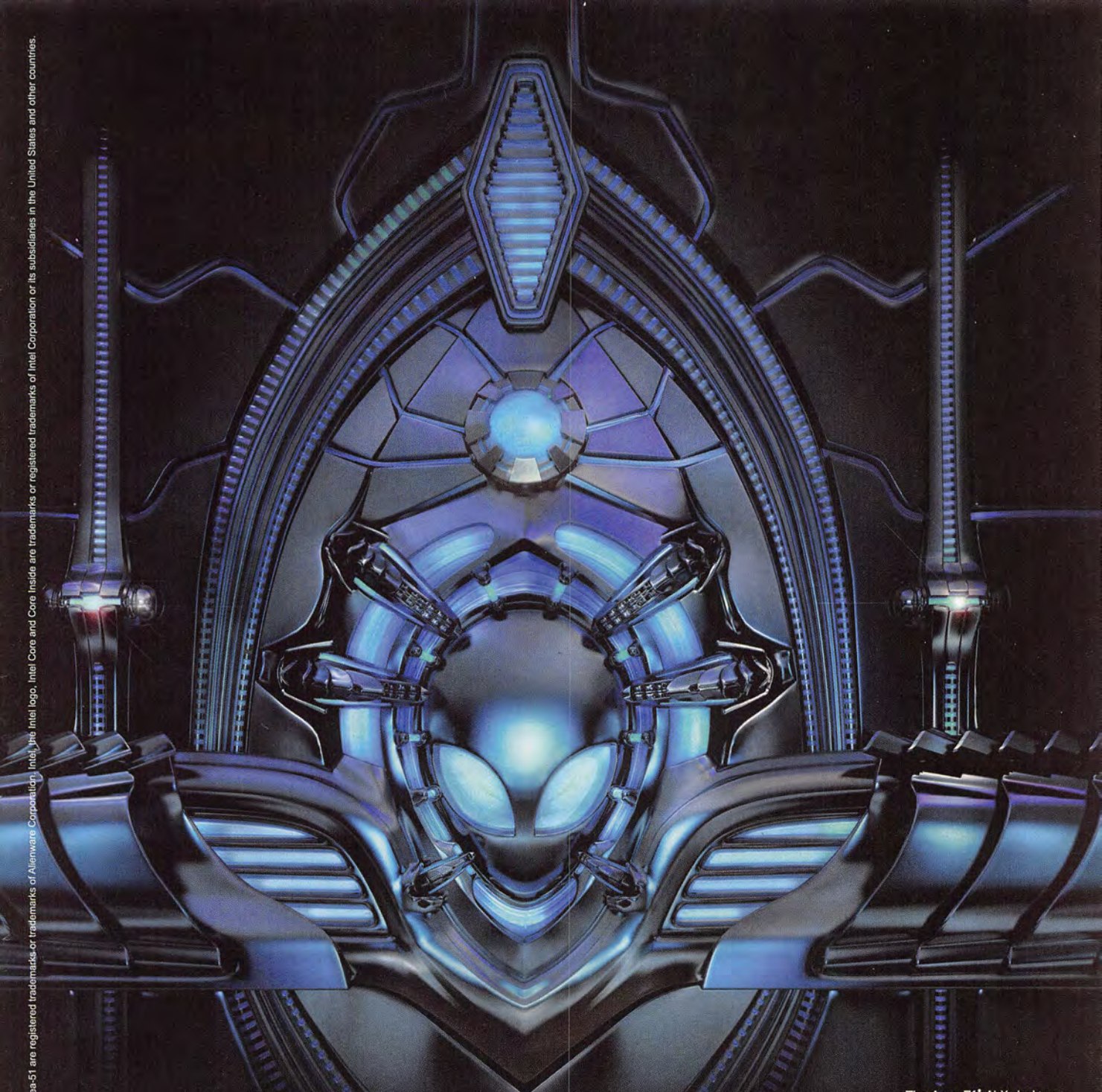
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Male Enhancement Pills . . .

Is it a Hoax or Do They Really Work?

Dr. Daniel Stein, M.D.



I wish I had a dollar for every patient or person that asked me over the last few years about increasing the size of "that certain part of the male body." The preoccupation with size that men have is a mystery to most women. The fact is it is completely normal for most men to want to be larger. It doesn't matter if they are smaller than average, average, or larger than average. It's even been my experience that guys that are almost too big, so big in fact that many women won't go near them with a ten foot pole (sorry about that) still want to be larger!

I was so intrigued by this fact that I started to do research about the "so called" male enhancement pills that came on the market several years ago. The concept that a simple pill could noticeably increase the size of a man's organ seemed plausible, but I wanted to know more. I had done much research over the years about certain sexually enhancing compounds available, so I believed the concept was sound that a pill could be made to make a man larger.

My first task was to look at some of the ads I had seen in magazines for male enhancement. There were some amazing claims by many of these makers. My personal favorite was a cream that claimed to make men instantly larger. I had to laugh out loud when I read what it said. The ad read, "apply cream, rub vigorously, increase your size." I thought for a minute and then decided you could put virtually anything on a man, including guacamole, and if he rubbed vigorously it would increase his size. Then there was an ad for a pill, that if taken daily, would increase the length of a man by 3 to 4 inches in just a few short days (sorry about the "short" comment).

I'm sorry, but after all those years of medical school, I know enough about anatomy to know that a guy who is 5 inches in length isn't going to add 3 to 4 inches to his little friend unless he buys a rope, gets a large brick, finds a bridge and...well, you get the picture. At about this time I was beginning to think that perhaps these makers hadn't found the magic mixture of compounds I had hoped they might have.

As the founder of both the Stein Medical Institute and the Foundation for Intimacy, I have spent most of my adult life trying to improve men and

"a pill that, if taken daily, would increase the length of a man by 3 to 4 inches."

women's sexual health. I pride myself on being the best medical doctor I can be and my reputation is important to me. So, when out of the clear blue sky, I got a call from the makers of Extenze, the leader in male enhancement, wanting me to be in one of their TV commercials, I thought, "Boy, did they pick the wrong guy!"

Little did they know that I had done real research into this concept and had recently looked at some of these male enhancement products. But the makers of Extenze seemed to be genuinely

convinced that their product really worked, and they claim to have sold over 100 million capsules to men all over the world. "Over 100 million capsules taken by men." With that single declaration, they had my interest. Either Extenze really worked or these guys were the world's greatest snake oil salesmen. So I requested that they send me Extenze formula so I could review it, then we would talk.



I then visited the Extenze.com web site, where I found a page that showed the top twelve adult film stars, all holding Extenze and endorsing it. I thought to myself, "Is it possible Extenze actually works?"

The next day I received the proprietary Extenze formula and there it was, virtually all of the ingredients that I hoped would be in a male enhancement product, 19 pharmaceutical grade nutraceuticals. There was Yohimbe (which used to be available by prescription only,) L-Arginine, Maca...all of it was there.

I contacted the makers of Extenze the very next day and asked them what they needed me for. They explained that they had a desire to have a medical doctor in their T.V. commercials to talk about the effectiveness of the ingredients in Extenze. At that moment an idea sprang into my head. I told them if they would let me improve the formula of Extenze, I would do the commercial for free!

Before I knew it I was working with their

"they claim to have sold almost a quarter of a billion capsules to men."

chemists at the manufacturing plant where we added the most revolutionary thing to the formula of Extenze. We added DHEA, also known as the "mother of all hormones." DHEA is the most important human prohormone and is the prohormone that converts into testosterone in men. DHEA levels decrease with the aging. Production peaks in a man's early 20's, and declines about 10% every 10 years. Low levels of testosterone can lead to low sex drive and a smaller sex organ.

After a few more weeks of tweaking the formula of Extenze, we were done. The new Extenze formula has been selling even better than the old formula, with over 75% of sales to repeat customers. Extenze has been on the market for 7 years and has sold almost a quarter of a billion capsules to men all over the world. It doesn't matter if you're 18 or 80 years old. In my opinion Extenze can make you larger, harder and increase both your intensity and pleasure and it is as simple as taking a single tablet daily. Extenze is so sure it would work for anyone that they're sending out a free one-week supply of Extenze for nothing more than the cost of a postage stamp. You can contact them directly at 800-844-3938. I recommend any man healthy enough to engage in sexual activity should try Extenze. You have nothing to lose but a lot to gain. ★

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Your self-portrait is so metaphorical, Gravy. Why did you draw a road down the middle? That's my long journey to get to where I'm at today. On the left is what I have to be thankful for: the microphone, the blessing of getting the role as B.I.G. **What's on the right side of the road?** That represents what could have happened to me. When I got shot outside Hot 97 a few years ago, I was hit in the buttocks. Thank God for that. What if I'd died or was confined to a wheelchair? **Did the bullet leave a bad scar?** Just

a little dimple on the butt. It's cute. **What did you do last night?** Did the nasty with my wife. We do it about twice a week. **How would you describe your taste in sex?** Hardcore. NASCAR, fast car. That means let's go hard and fast. **Have you ever videotaped yourself having NASCAR sex?** About a year ago, with my wife. I look at it to help get aroused. Always with my woman. I never, ever masturbate. **What?! What guy doesn't masturbate?** I have a wife! Why would I need to beat my meat?

If we drug-tested you, what would we find? Some good blood. I never did drugs or alcohol. I did get arrested for selling drugs, though: weed, crack. I was terrible at it. **Ever been so terrible at a job that you were fired?** During my time at Nathan's, I dropped at least 500 hot dogs. I'd just pick them up and put them back on the rack. The manager had me scrubbing the ceiling. What the fuck? **What do you think Heaven is like?** A great place to visit. I feel like Earth is hell—all the evils,

like AIDS, drugs, guns, poverty. **Describe your worst haircut.** I had a bald head when I was 24. I was trying to be like Michael Jordan. But this head is too big for that. **What would your exes say about you?** One would say, "He was the man of my dreams." Also, "That's fucked up, how he cheated on me." **Finally, have you answered all these questions honestly?** Yeah. **Even the one about not masturbating?** That one you'll have to find out on your own. Um, actually, you can't find that one out! 

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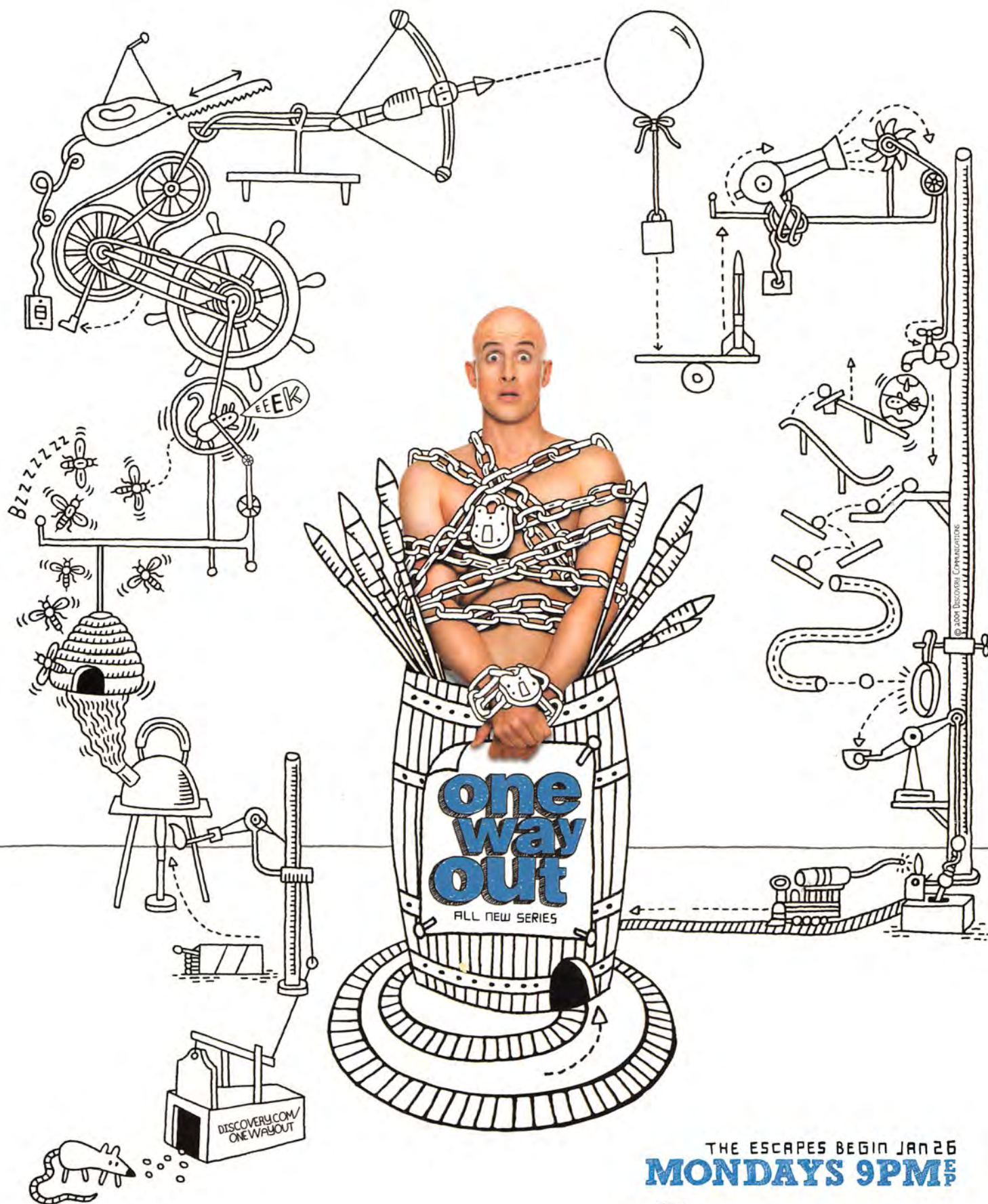
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